SFX

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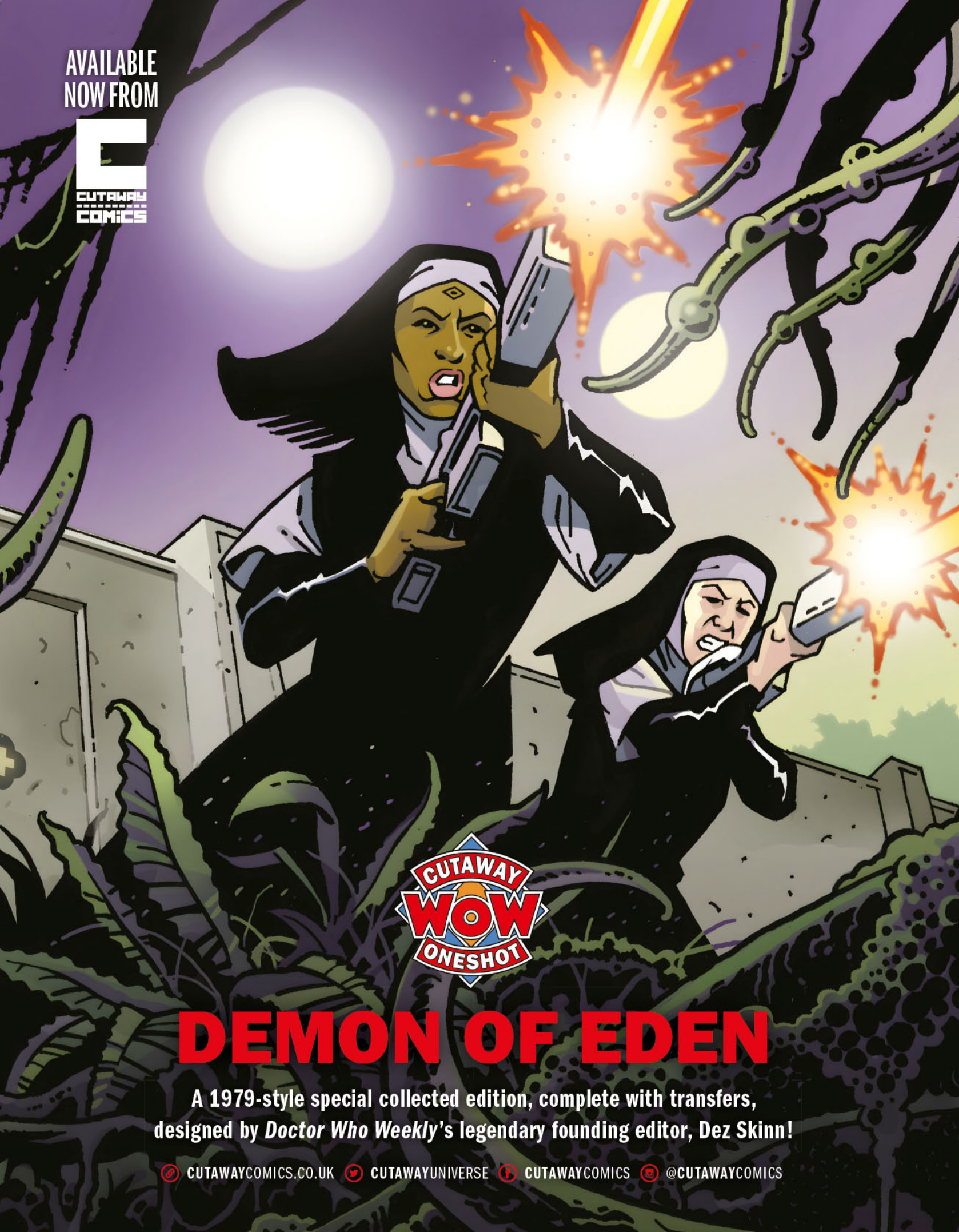
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FEATURES

22 THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY
Or should that be *The Sparrow Academy*? Read on...

30 HULKLING AND WICCAN
With great representation comes great responsibility.

36 BLOOD SYNDICATE
Here's a comic that's a Milestone in so many ways.

40 BATWOMAN
How Ryan Wilder faced the final Bat-curtain.

42 QUEER FOR FEAR
Bryan Fuller's docuseries on the impact of gay ghoulishness.

54 STAR TREK: STRANGE NEW WORLDS
Pike and the Enterprise crew submit to the *SFX* mind-meld.

60 THE LAZARUS PROJECT
Hey, Cher – you *can* turn back time! You *can* find a way!

64 HORUS HERESY: AGE OF DARKNESS
Game on! Today the tabletop... tomorrow the universe.

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Head to page 20 for details



RED ALERT

8 OBI-WAN KENOBI
Who's more foolish, the fool or the fool who interviews him?

10 BRIAN AND CHARLES
The heartwarming tale of one man and a pile of old rubbish.

12 HALO
Master Chief himself brings us a tactical update on season two.

14 MINIONS: THE RISE OF GRU
Revealed: the utterly Gru-some backstory of *Despicable Me*.

16 JUDGMENT DAY
Avengers! X-Men! Eternals! So much spandex flying around.

REVIEWS

70 JURASSIC WORLD DOMINION
Aiming our cool critical asteroid at the age of the dinosaurs.

76 STRANGER THINGS
The upside downsides of the long-awaited fourth season.

78 THE BATMAN
Forget it, Bruce, it's Riddlertown... The Dark Knight returns.

86 ORDINARY MONSTERS
This Victorian fantasy novel is a bit of a Talents show.

94 EVIL DEAD: THE GAME
From video nasty to videogame, it's been quite the trip.

REGULARS

96 BLASTERMIND
Some Qs and some As about all things LGBTQ+.

98 TOTAL RECALL
Face to face with our love for *Batman Returns*. Vote Penguin!

First Contact

Hailing Frequencies Open!



Butterfingers? No, sausages, as a matter of fact.

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STRANGE BREW

Stuart Reekie, email *Everything Everywhere All At Once*: basically *Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness* for grown-ups. Complex, multilayered and completely bonkers (Jamie Lee Curtis with hot dog fingers!). Who knew that laundry and taxes could be so enthralling?

JEAN-LUC WHO'S TALKING

David Patrick, email How can something that has clearly had a lot of time and money spent on it and has A-class actors with good special effects be so woefully written as *Star Trek: Picard*? Two seasons now and this one is no better than the last!

SFX: Don't mince words, Bones. What do you really think?

ISSUE 352 REVIEW

Brian Stabler, email Total Recall [*SFX* 352] brought back fond memories for me. Like Will I used to travel into Hull during the '90s for my monthly fix of comics. The thing I always liked about Armadillo (other than being indirectly introduced to *SFX* by them!) was their decision not to scalp fans for variant editions of comics. Other shops would jack the prices up by the factor of their rarity, but Armadillo just put them out on the shelves at standard cover price. Those were the days. It's a pity that reading comics has got so expensive over the years, with many shops now charging pound for dollar!

Ryan Welsh, email Just read your *Short Circuit* feature [*SFX* 352] with much fondness. I was slightly disturbed by your faux pas of stating in a caption that "Newton Crosby (Steve Guttenberg)" was about to "get it". It should have read "Frank (Brian McNamara)". Otherwise, a fantastic read!

SFX: Well spotted, Ryan. Our proofing droids have had their optical sensors fully upgraded!

***Stranger Things*: [People] binge at least four episodes in a row last season and now they are claiming episodes are too long?**

Ian Ellery

Yasmin Finney and Ncuti Gatwa: From what I've seen, they're both fantastic and I look forward to seeing them in the TARDIS.

@snarkyandnarked

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SFX

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Rants & Raves

Inside the SFX hive mind



DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ You'll have binged it by now, but *Stranger Things* 4 ticked all my horror boxes. Brilliant! Viva Kate Bush!

→ Everyone talking excitedly about *Doctor Who* is a joy. Quite right too.

→ Halloween Horror Nights announcement season has begun, with the first house pitting you against Dracula, Wolfman *and* the Mummy. Very excited!



IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ With all the photos emerging from location filming, it's an exciting time to be a *Doctor Who* fan. Wilf's return pleases me enormously. *If* RTD does a multiverse thing, I hope he hasn't forgotten Lenny Henry's 1985 Doctor...

→ Was impressed by *Everything Everywhere All At Once* – though I did get a little lost in the middle section.

→ I've got a bit obsessed with the British Library's Tales Of The Weird series of collections of old supernatural tales (latest entries: *The Night Wire* and *Our Haunted Shores*). They're so handsomely designed.



JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RANTS

→ I'd hoped that *Obi-Wan Kenobi* might have incorporated some of the cinematic language from the original *Star Wars* to make the series feel more like an extension of the first movie. But without a John Williams score, or any of the familiar visual cues and camera techniques, it just feels very generic.



ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

→ BBC Four's Christopher Lee evening was excellent. Even better, they finally repeated his 2000 Ghost Story For Christmas telling of "The Ash Tree" for the first time, which was mysteriously absent from the DVD releases.

RANTS

→ I'd love to see more directors take on Robert Aickman's very strange short stories, with their ambiguous endings and unsettling tone. Ben Wheatley, lad, get on it!



NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ Loving The More Things Change, the new Ace Records compilation of the mighty John Barry's film and TV scores from '68-'73. Get your headphones on and feel life become infinitely cooler, sexier and more mysterious.

→ Thrilling to see the 60th anniversary reissues of the Bond movies on the big screen, where they belong.



TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ Had a great time watching the OG *Jurassic Park* cast return to flee new dinos in *Jurassic World Dominion*. In light of the last two years, I was also unequivocally rooting for the dinosaurs.

→ *Evil* is back for its third season and it remains one of today's best horror series: smart, subversive and always unexpected.

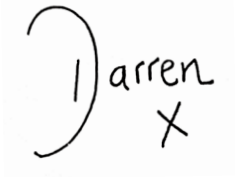


Captain's Log



A special Pride issue of *SFX*? Times really have changed since I picked up the first issue back in 1995. And that's just one of the many reasons why I felt that a) it was finally time to do it and b) it was important. I wanted to showcase the talent and contributions of the many LGBTQ+ creators around the world who work endlessly to not only bring entertainment to our brains but to raise awareness and visibility for other people in the community – and also to change perceptions and, in their own way, the world, slowly but surely, by challenging prejudices and making things better for future generations. Of course, there's bazillions of wonderful LGBTQ+ people out there who, in their own way, contribute to the things that *SFX* covers and we only had time and space to speak to a handful of them – I'm 100% certain there will be many more to come. It's my daily experience, and I know it's also the daily experience of many of our readers, who I'm sure will appreciate why I'm waving the flag this month.

Representation and visibility truly matters, so if you see anyone getting a little grumpy at this issue being a tad queer, turn it into love for your fellow fans and let's just support each other. I truly found *my* people through sci-fi. *Doctor Who* is where my found family really began, and for that I will forever be grateful. Have fun, geek out, happy Pride and we'll see you in four weeks' time!



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THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

JULY 2022

→ NEWS //// INTERVIEWS //// INSIGHT //// BANANARAMA!



8 SITH HAPPENS

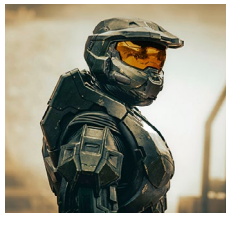
Ewan McGregor talks returning as Obi-Wan Kenobi

Highlights



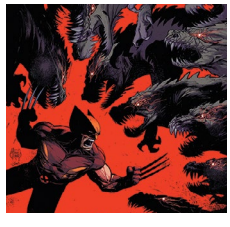
10
BRIAN AND CHARLES

→ You'll be surprised what a lonely man can turn his hand to... Stoppit!



12
HALO

→ Pablo Schreiber teases season two of the hit videogame tie-in show as season one arrives in the UK.



16
JUDGMENT DAY

→ The Avengers, X-Men and Eternals have an *AXE* to grind in this new multi-title Marvel crossover event.

SCI-FACT! Obi-Wan Kenobi didn't have his own signature music until John Williams composed a theme for the TV show.



ACTOR EXCLUSIVE

The Master Plan

Ewan McGregor on returning to the role of a lifetime in **Obi-Wan Kenobi**

Obi contemplates getting some carpet.

PERHAPS APPROPRIATELY FOR A FRANCHISE IN WHICH destiny is a way of life, Ewan McGregor's return to a galaxy far, far away feels like it could have been written in the stars. While an Obi-Wan Kenobi comeback tour seemed highly unlikely when he settled down to a life of exile at the close of George Lucas's prequel trilogy, it turned out that fate, the universe and – perhaps most importantly – Disney+ had other ideas.

"What's interesting about the character at this point," *Obi-Wan Kenobi* writer/executive producer Joby Harold tells Red Alert, "is that the story is halfway between *Episode III* and *Episode IV*. If you consider how old Sir Alec Guinness would have been in *A New Hope*, that puts Ewan around the same age – I think there's maybe a three-year discrepancy there. So Ewan is actually of age at exactly the right time in his journey of an actor to take on this character that will one day become Alec Guinness's interpretation of the role."

McGregor says he "always believed there was a great story to tell between *Episodes III* and *IV*," and he joined forces with Lucasfilm a long time ago to find it. As far back as 2017, McGregor (who's a producer on the show as well as its star) was working with Stephen Daldry on an Obi-Wan movie, before the *Billy Elliot* director left the project, and Disney's plans for the veteran Jedi shifted to the small screen. That's how McGregor ultimately ended up back on the sands of Tatooine, swinging a lightsaber for the first time in nearly two decades.

"Obi-Wan's trying to live a normal life and trying *not* to be a Jedi anymore," McGregor explains. "We started by saying, 'Let's take this character we know and love as an able Jedi Master and a peacekeeper – all the things that you saw him become through those three prequels – and then take him to this very broken place at the beginning of the story.'"

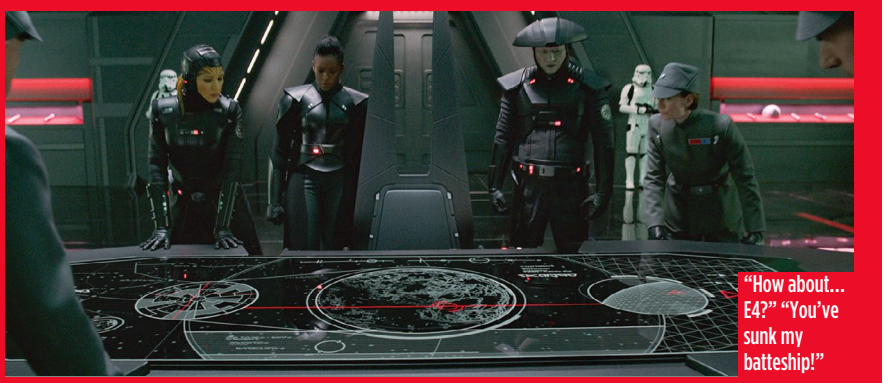
It's not hard to see why Kenobi's been experiencing the ultimate



Luke's uncle Owen is played by Joel Edgerton.



Stormtroopers need to be walked twice daily.



"How about... E4?" "You've sunk my batteship!"



> **"Some of the fight sequences are every bit as intricate as they were in the films"**

mid-life crisis. While he's been keeping a watchful eye on the pre-teen Luke Skywalker – who's currently living with his aunt and uncle on the family moisture farm – 10 years of Imperial rule has made sure the galaxy is anything but Jedi-friendly. Force-wielding Inquisitors are ruthlessly hunting down the few surviving members of the Order, and then there's the small matter of the former apprentice Obi-Wan left to barbecue on the volcanic world of Mustafar. Luckily for McGregor, catching up with prequels co-star Hayden Christensen – who returns as Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader – wasn't quite as stressful as Kenobi's much-hyped reunion with Darth Vader promises to be.

"I love Hayden and we spent a lot of time together in Australia when we shot *Episode II* and *III*," McGregor recalls. "If we weren't shooting together, we were very often in the fight gym together because we had so much fighting to do, so we were always learning that choreography and training. My daughter, who's 26 now, was only little but she really loved Hayden and he was very sweet with her. He's just really one of the good guys. And can you imagine, as a young actor, taking on playing Darth Vader? But he did it.

"Afterwards, Hayden made other movies," McGregor continues, "but he also had a property in Canada where he's a farmer, and he raises cattle and sheep. I love that sort of duality to his life. It was just lovely to work with him again, and it really did feel very natural. Looking across at him it was like the last 20 years didn't even happen, like they were just a dream."

Those two decades definitely *did* happen, however, a fact that was clearly on the 51-year-old McGregor's mind when he reignited that famous blue lightsaber. "Some of the fight sequences are every bit as intricate as they were in the films," he says.

"And I knew that because I was older I had to keep up with that, so I got really fit before I even started the fight training. Then doing the training keeps you very fit as well."

FORCE MAJEURE

In the unlikely event that McGregor had any doubts regarding his status among the *Star Wars* faithful, confirmation of his exalted position came during auditions for the show's supporting cast. He may not be the original Obi-Wan Kenobi, but his presence is still enough to create a great disturbance in the Force.

"We borrowed a bit of the *Mandalorian* set, and used their crew, and our director of photography and Deborah [Chow, *Obi-Wan Kenobi*'s director]," McGregor says of the screen tests. "When I got there, they'd gone into their extras wardrobe department, and they brought out some Obi-Wan-esque pieces of clothing that weren't really my costume, but sort of felt like the right idea.

"Then I walked on set, and I think the thing that's happened since I made those three films is that – especially in America – there are so many *Star Wars* fans in the crew, a lot of young kids who really live and breathe this stuff. They've ended up working in *Star Wars* because they're *Star Wars* fans, and when I walked on to do the screen tests as Obi-Wan, you could just feel the excitement of it and the anticipation." Maybe it really was destiny, after all. **RE**

Obi-Wan Kenobi is on Disney+ now.





DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

The Appliance Of Science

The director of **Brian And Charles** talks *ET* and washing machines

FORGET THE SLEEK designs of Gort, C-3PO and *Metropolis*'s Maria – Charles Petrescu, the robot star of new British comedy *Brian And Charles*, has a washing machine for a stomach and the head of an old man mannequin. "We didn't want to make him slick," says director Jim Archer. "That wouldn't work for our story. He has to be a bit of a failure, while at the same time being very accomplished. Also, it just made us laugh. It's so dumb to have a massive washing machine with a mannequin's head stuck on top."

Charles is the crowning achievement of the lonely and eccentric Brian (David Earl), an unlucky inventor who spends his time in a remote Welsh village coming up with inventions like a flying cuckoo clock and shoes with trawler nets attached. Shot in an offbeat mockumentary style, the film sees a camera crew follow Brian as he embarks on his most ambitious project yet: building a robot from the leftover rubbish of a fly-tip. The result is Charles (played by Chris Hayward, who co-wrote the script with Earl), a petulant robot with a taste for cabbages and a dangerous desire to see the outside world.



Brian (David Earl) and one of his lesser friends.

Brian And Charles began as a loose double-act sketch that comedian David Earl would perform on stage and radio shows. Earl and Hayward developed the idea into a 12-minute short, directed by Archer. "We made it for like £500 in an Airbnb in the Welsh countryside with four or five of us," he says. "It was a funny script, but we didn't make it with the intention of it becoming a film."

Nonetheless, the short soon attracted the attention of Film4, who asked the team to develop it into something bigger. "The short is very focused on Brian and Charles," explains Archer, "which is great for 12 minutes, but couldn't really sustain 90." They fleshed out the original short by adding local bully Eddie (Jamie Michie) as an antagonist, and including a love triangle between Brian, Charles and the shy, sheltered Hazel, played by *Sherlock*'s Louise Brealey.

"We had so many different versions we went through," says Archer. "We had versions where Charles was from outer space, we had versions where he was rebuilt to be 25 feet tall, but nothing was quite right. Then we realised how important it is that Brian builds



This is what *Star Wars* could have been.

him. Because we knew it was going to be about loneliness and that's such a seminal part of it. David really cracked it when he said that it was a father-son relationship."

The creative team debated about making *Brian And Charles* into a more conventional film, but decided to keep the mockumentary style of the short so that Earl had the freedom to play around with a looser, more natural script. "It's mostly scripted, but we improvised everything," says Archer. "With that documentary style, if you ever start to hear the script, it doesn't work. People need to be able to say the lines in their own voice.

"That style is also important for understanding Brian's loneliness before Charles comes along. David is so good at delivering nuanced dialogue where you read between the lines. He says one thing but we know he means another."

> **"We had versions where Charles was from outer space"**

But of course, Brian is not alone for long. Filming with Charles was a challenge, says Archer, not only for him but for actor and writer Chris Hayward.

"The house we were shooting in was really small and Charles is so bulky that lots of stuff would be getting knocked over," explains Archer. "Chris was sewn into the costume, so he couldn't see a thing. It was a pain to get him in and out of it. We would have to hand him bananas through the shirt! But in a way, the fact that David had to guide Chris and hold his hand added to the story."

Archer is keen to stress that the creative team approached *Brian And Charles* as a comedy first and foremost, rather than, say, a profound exploration of what artificial intelligence tells us about humanity. But that doesn't mean that the film is without depth. On the contrary, one of the creative team's major touchstones was Steven Spielberg's *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial*.

"In older drafts we even had a plot where the government was coming after Charles and we were like, 'This is way too similar to *ET*!'", says Archer. "When we made the short, a lot of people related to it in different ways. Some saw Charles as their grandparents who have dementia. Others saw a dog.

"For me there's a bit of death in there – it's all about letting go," he adds. "It's a really stupid comedy, but we did try and put some heart into it." **SK**

Brian And Charles is in cinemas from 8 July.

SCI-FACT! **David Earl is a frequent collaborator of Ricky Gervais and was in his recent Netflix project *After Life*.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ Holy inevitability! Robert Pattinson and Matt Reeves are back for **The Batman 2**.
→ **The Man Who Fell To Earth** drops onto Paramount+ in the UK from 22 June.
→ *Dark City*'s Alex Proyas directing period horror **Sister Darkness**.
→ Dan Stevens joining the Monsterverse for the **Godzilla Vs Kong** sequel.
→ Christopher Walken is Emperor Shaddam IV in **Dune: Part Two**.
→ Jodie Comer starring in eco-apocalypse tale **The End We Start From**.
→ Liam Neeson and Joe Keery joining **Cold Storage**, adapting the novel by David Koepp.
→ Hayden Panettiere returning to face Ghostface in **Scream 6**.
→ Tom Blyth is the young Coriolanus Snow in *Hunger Games* prequel **The Ballad Of Songbirds And Snakes**.
→ Pixar's **Elemental** set for 16 June 2023 release, directed by *The Good Dinosaur*'s Peter Sohn.
→ Lou Ferrigno playing a pig-farming cannibal in **The Hermit**.
→ *Legion*'s Arkasha Stevenson directing prequel **The First Omen**.



GETTY

SCI-FACT! If you're curious, "not that heavy" for Schreiber means the armour weighs "about 55 pounds, 23-24 kilos or something like that."

ACTOR EXCLUSIVE

Bred For War

Halo's Pablo Schreiber on the ups and downs of playing Master Chief



Will we ever get to see Chief's face? Yes. A *lot*.



But before that, there's a lot of shooting to do.



WHILE ACTOR PABLO SCHREIBER dabbled with comic books as a teenager in British Columbia, Canada – the first ones he fell in love with were *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *ElfQuest*, before "the whole expanded universe of *X-Men*, Wolverine being my favourite character" – he didn't follow that up with becoming a fan of sci-fi.

Sport eventually took over, and now he says that it's drama that holds his interest. "I just like really strong writing, that's what pulls me in the most as a viewer," he tells Red Alert. "A lot of the work that I've done has been outside of my specific tastes as a viewer. It's cool, because it exposes me to different worlds."

HALO, WORLD

He chuckles. "I got some heat for this on social media the other day... I classified *American Gods* as science fiction, but it was more the idea that the rules of the world are different from the rules that we live in.

"I've read more in that realm than I've watched. But it's really cool for me as an artist to get to play in that, because the rules are so different, because it exists so much in the land of imagination and pushing boundaries and visiting worlds that are not familiar to us."

Halo, he says, first came to his attention in college, where he'd play the videogame casually with friends. "I really had no idea of it as a story or as a mythology – I didn't know any of the story that had been created." So ahead of the new Paramount+ live-action series, Microsoft sent him the cinematics of the game, and he studied everything that a gamer would experience in *Halo*.

"I was immediately shocked and taken aback that this first-person shooter that I had come across and encountered in my twenties was actually this treasure trove of story and mythology, and really just brilliantly laid out work by so many great artists."

It was this, rather than endlessly playing the game, that drove Schreiber's interpretation of the iconic Master Chief. "Our goal was to break the character down," he says. "Not move him in a new direction, but show a different side of him. So a side of him that the gamer has never experienced." This meant evolving Master Chief from an avatar and symbol into a fully-fledged leading character. "The process of the first season was kind of breaking that relationship that people had with Chief, of knowing and recognising him as themselves," Schreiber explains.

"We knew going into it that it was going to be a slightly uncomfortable experience for many viewers because of how long they've lived with this paradigm of Chief. But the idea is, for a long-form television series, hopefully that discomfort of the first season and the breaking of the paradigm will pay off long term in the relationship that you'll get to have with this guy."

Playing Master Chief is, he says, "a huge honour. I was kind of shocked that I was being



> “I was kind of shocked that I was being given permission to be this guy”

“Is this pointing the right way? Can’t see.”

given permission to be this guy,” and he’s very aware of the legacy that comes with it. “There’s as many opinions in the *Halo* fandom as there are *Halo* fans. So we knew we weren’t going to be able to please every single person.

“My goal has been to do this character and this world justice because as I said, I really fell in love with the *Halo* mythology, with the extent of the story.

“You can’t please everybody, but I want to make sure that we’re also taking criticism and suggestions where they can be applied.”



Season two is already greenlit – with Schreiber keen to make his armour more functional. “It’s not that heavy, it’s more than the lack of mobility – you can’t raise your arms above your shoulders. Most importantly, the interactivity of the suits and the weapons, because the design is for a videogame where the laws of physics don’t apply!”

But it’s not just about aesthetics – further change is afoot in the second season. “I have all my own feelings about what we were successful about in season one, versus where we need to go in season two,” he says. “That’s the behind-the-scenes story that I’ve been pushing for, elevating the story and making it better and better and better from the very, very beginning. I’m just thrilled where we’re heading because the scripts are coming in for season two, and they are, like, just *so* good, *so* much better than what we had in the first season, and when you start with really great material, that is everything.

“To now go back with these *amazing* scripts from a super-high quality writer [David Wiener, who is replacing Kyle Killen and Steven Kane as showrunner] who I’m just thrilled has come on-board, I think is really going to change the game for us.” **DS**

Halo is on Paramount+ in the UK from 22 June.

SCI-FACT! Other Vicious 6 villains include roller-skating Swede Svengeance (Dolph Lundgren) and lethal holy woman Nunchuck (Lucy Lawless).



DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Bad Gru Rising

Why *Despicable Me* origin story **Minions: The Rise Of Gru** is "almost like a romcom"

WHETHER YOU'RE BLOFELD OR DR EVIL, EVERY aspiring supervillain needs a henchperson to aid their quest for world domination – and in the closing scenes of *Despicable Me* spin-off *Minions*, a young Gru fleetingly came face-to-face with his yellow-hued partners-in-crime. Some things are just meant to be...

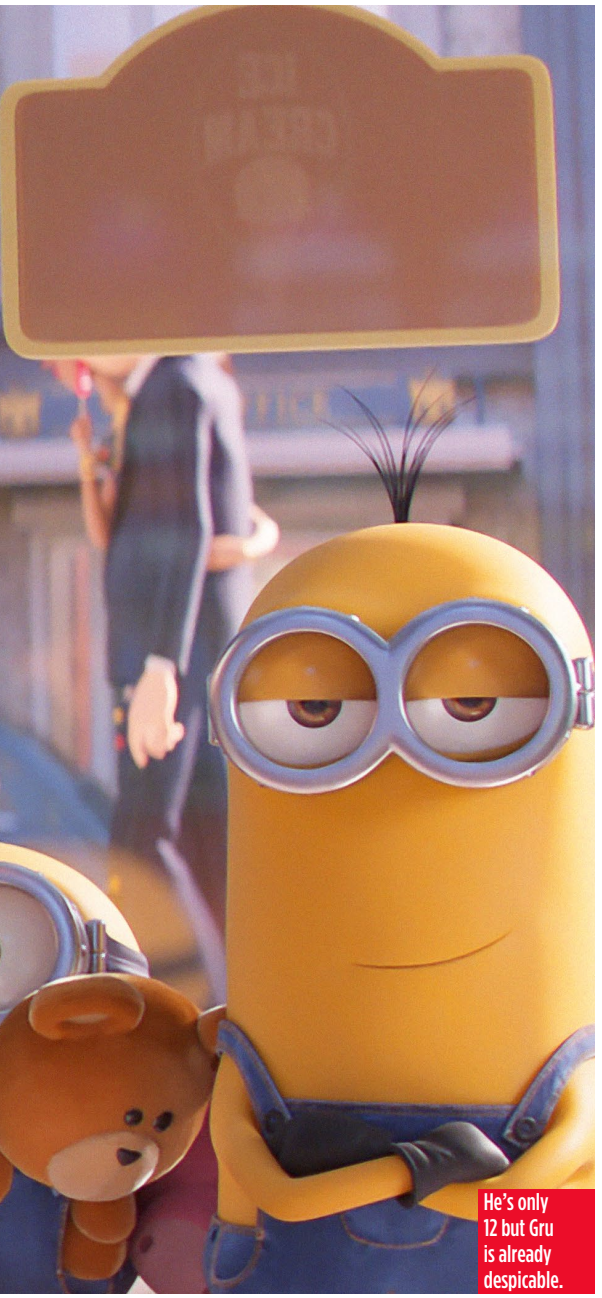
"It just felt like the most auspicious way to conclude the first *Minions* film," *Minions: The Rise Of Gru* director Kyle Balda tells Red Alert. "They'd spent the entire movie looking for their ideal big boss, but we only scratched the surface with this sort of glance across the way. *The Rise Of Gru* gets more into their origin story and how they formed the bond that they have in *Despicable Me*. The misadventures that happen in this film eventually lead to them becoming the team that they are."

Though the animated franchise isn't quite approaching Marvel or *Star Wars* levels of complexity, this '70s-set *Minions* follow-up is plugging a hole in an ever-expanding continuity – a sixth movie, *Despicable Me 4*, is due in 2024. By introducing a 12-year-old Gru (again voiced by Steve Carell) to Kevin, Stuart, Bob and their previously unseen colleague Otto, this sequel/prequel establishes the dream line-up that turned a surprisingly loveable supervillain's 2010 debut into a global smash.

"We're getting to meet Gru and see what his life at home is like, and maybe why he wants to be a villain," Balda explains. "But it's also very much a *Minions* film, because for them their whole life is about Gru and meeting him. It's almost like a romcom in a way because there's a kind of getting them together/breaking them up/getting them back together dynamic involved."

"I think Gru and the Minions are sort of two sides of the same coin," he adds, "because on one hand you have the Minions who want to work for a bad guy, but





He's only 12 but Gru is already despicable.

idolises a supergroup of villains known as the Vicious 6. Nothing would make him happier than joining forces with Taraji P Henson's disco-inspired Belle Bottom, Jean-Claude Van Damme's claw-wielding Jean Clawed (really) and the rest of the morally flexible, pun-happy sextet.

"The Vicious 6 are the baddest villains of the '70s," says Balda, "and it's about Gru wanting to belong to something and be accepted by a group of peers. It's not coming from a sense of Gru being really corrupt – it's more about playing with the absurdity of this kind of villainy. We're always looking for the ridiculousness of what these [Bond-style] villains can be like, and I think the main challenge is keeping them feeling like they could be menacing, but also being able to laugh at them."

Though the majority of *The Rise Of Gru*'s audience will be way too young to remember the '70s first-hand, the movie will embrace the period: a *Jaws* poster is prominent in the trailer, music producer Jack Antonoff is assembling an era-appropriate soundtrack, and you can expect to see plenty of martial arts action.

"The Minions' anatomy isn't really designed for doing kung fu!" Balda laughs, "but I think their limitations are what bring a lot of the comedy about. When you put the Minions in a particular situation ideas can come out from anywhere."

Which is probably appropriate for a franchise that's made a habit of mixing cute, cartoony characters with sophisticated references to spy movies – a magical alchemy that, after close to four billion dollars at the global box office, the filmmakers have well and truly sussed out.

"We're trying to find a level of humour that can appeal to all ages," says Balda. "We want parents to have just as much fun as their kids in these films. One of the things that we go for with the Minions – partly because their language is not a language anyone knows – is taking inspiration from Charlie Chaplin or Peter Sellers.

"They didn't require the dialogue or any particular references to be gettable, because they were speaking to human nature. What we're hoping to instil in the Minions is this relatability on a human level – even though they're not human." **RE**

Minions: The Rise Of Gru is in cinemas from 1 July.

"It's about Gru wanting to belong to something and be accepted by a group of peers"

there's nothing really truly bad about them. And then Gru wants nothing more than to be a bad guy, but I think deep in his heart, he's a good person."

While most kids of the '70s would have been putting posters of pop stars, actors or footballers on their walls, the young Gru





NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION



→ Ncuti Gatwa is the new Doctor, while David Tennant, Catherine Tate and Bernard Cribbins reunite for **Doctor Who**'s 60th anniversary.
→ Jude Law leads **Star Wars: Skeleton Crew** for Disney+, exec-produced by MCU Spidey helmer Jon Watts.
→ New **Daredevil** series heading to Disney+.
→ Netflix developing season six of **Black Mirror**.
→ Ed Skrein is the villain in Zack Snyder's **Rebel Moon**.
→ **Legends Of Tomorrow** and **Batwoman** both cancelled.
→ 20th Century Studios developing new adap of **The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen**.
→ Tyler Hoechlin starring in **Teen Wolf** reunion movie for Paramount+.
→ **A Master Of Djinn** by P Djèlí Clark wins Nebula Award for Novel.
→ **Quantum Leap** revival wins full series order, starring Raymond Lee.
→ New animated *Star Wars* anthology **Tales Of The Jedi** in the works.
→ *WandaVision*'s Matt Shakman directing the opening episodes of **Godzilla & The Titans**.

GETTY

SCI-FACT! Along with tie-in issues of ***Immortal X-Men***, Gillen is also scripting ***Eternals***-centred spin-off ***Death To The Mutants***.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

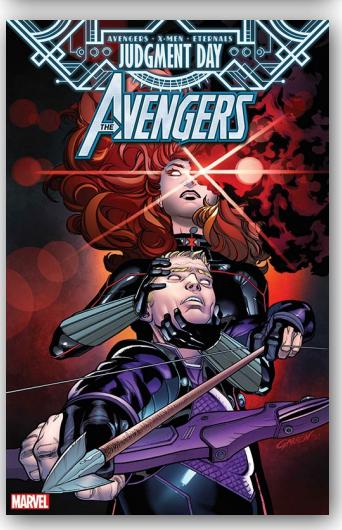
Resurrection Shuffle

The Avengers, X-Men and Eternals go to war in Marvel crossover **Judgment Day**

AFTER HIS RUNS ON *Immortal X-Men* and *Eternals*, Kieron Gillen is pitting the long-living extraterrestrials against the Merry Mutants in *Avengers X-Men Eternals: Judgment Day* – with Earth's Mightiest Heroes stuck in the middle.

"I was already working on threads between the two books, which was more of a shadow war – like psychic ghost operations – between the two peoples," says Gillen, who is joined by artist Valerio Schiti. "Marvel asked about the possibility of an event, and I realised it could be a lot more overt, and a really interesting inciting incident for a much bigger, brutal, philosophical summer blockbuster. So I've been aggressive in placing the event as something that comes from the existing stories in all three lines, including my *Eternals* climax, the Hellfire Gala – and you can even trace the roots of this story all the way back to Jason Aaron and Ed McGuinness's *Avengers* issue one in 2008."





Warning that Earth's Mightiest Heroes "maybe shouldn't have set up shop inside the corpse of one of the Eternal gods if they don't want to get involved," Gillen says the six-parter finds the Eternals clashing with the X-Men over their newfound ability to resurrect themselves. "Act One begins with the Eternals starting a war with the mutants, with the Avengers trying to stop it spilling out of control," explains Gillen.

"That absolutely feels like Judgment Day, and it comes to the fore in the second act, where things get larger, but also much more personal. This is a story where everyone on Earth is challenged and judged, and in this case the Avengers, X-Men and Eternals are all to blame."

Describing it as "feeling like you're literally writing the Marvel Universe," Gillen is enjoying juggling his sizeable roster of characters. "It's fun, getting the chance to put together people who are otherwise rarely in contact," he says. "However, it's also important to have a core cast – the people who are the emotional backbone of the story, even if we have a lot of cameos. They include Iron Man, Jean Grey, Sersi, Captain America, Ajak, Mister Sinister, Druig, Uranos and Nightcrawler, as well as some big parts for some other players, and surprise guests!"

With Gillen insisting that it isn't "a thematic sequel," *Judgment Day* is very different to 2012's *Avengers Vs X-Men*. "*AvX* was all about the unresolvable differences between the two groups," says Gillen. "At the start of *Judgment Day*, that's not true – there's tension between the Avengers and the mutants due to the secrets the X-Men have been keeping, but it's the Eternals who are the aggressors. In Act One, it's easy to see who the bad guys are and even the good guy Eternals agree on the Eternals being out of control."

While he has previously penned tie-ins to past events, *Avengers X-Men Eternals* is the first time that Gillen has helmed a crossover himself. "I really wanted to bring that experience to the story, so while Act One gives you the glorious huge action set-pieces, which are absolutely born out of the mutant and Eternal world, Act Two gives literally everyone a really cool question – the core question of Judgment Day – which can be personalised infinitely for the other books," he says, referring to the various spin-offs. "This is a big-scale story with some cosmic powerhouses, but I wanted the street characters to be there in an emotional way too." **SJ**

Avengers X-Men Eternals: Judgment Day issue one is out on 6 July.



SCI-FACT! **Clementine made her comic book debut in 2021 anthology *Skybound X*, in a story also written by Walden.**



WRITER/ARTIST EXCLUSIVE

The Freezing Dead

The Walking Dead's **Clementine** moves from games to comics in Tillie Walden's graphic novel

HAVING MADE HER DEBUT in *The Walking Dead* videogames, Clementine is now set to headline her first comic, starring in a trio of Young Adult graphic novels by writer/artist Tillie Walden.

"It's been interesting working with a character who has such a long backstory, which is more common in the Marvel or DC Universe, where characters have long, established histories," Walden tells Red Alert. "There's a lot of huge gaps in Clementine's history as she jumps in age between season two and three of the games and the third and fourth season as well, and there's also some time between the end of the games and when my story starts."

While *The Walking Dead* is renowned for its unflinching gore, Walden had to consider the more sensitive requirements of her adolescent readers."That was hard because it's naturally a violent world, which is full of horror, terror and trauma," she admits. "But kids are in it, so I had to find a way to balance the horror elements for a Young Adult audience. There were a couple of sequences where there was too much axeing people in the head, so we had to hide it a little bit.

"But, at the same time, a lot of the topics that come up in YA books like dealing with your sexuality, coming of age and dealing with trauma are all good stuff for *The Walking Dead* universe, as I feel that it's at its best when it's not just about the Walkers."

With adults mostly conspicuous by their absence, *Clementine*'s survivalist scenario channels William Golding's classic 1954 novel *Lord Of The Flies*. "I wonder how many *Flies* stories there are in the zombie apocalypse," laughs Walden. "The kids' parents are all dead, so someone has to be in charge, and someone is going to mess things up!"

In contrast to the main *Walking Dead* series' midwestern locale, Walden's story takes place in her own Vermont. "It was good because I live near that mountain, so a lot of what I drew on is just outside my window," she says of the abandoned ski resort that Clementine journeys to. "I know what it's like to live here in the winter, as even with heating and the grid, it's tough with seasonal depression and the way the darkness can get under your skin."



When it came to how the Walkers cope in the freezing conditions, Walden deferred to *Walking Dead* co-creator Robert Kirkman. "We talked to him about how smell and zombies work because I was like, 'Maybe they're slower but they're sharper?'" says Walden. "Robert was around for every part of the process, giving feedback, but he'd just say, 'You do you.'"

With this first volume totalling 244 pages, Walden appreciated the scope of the extended format. "By having three big hulking graphic novels, there's so much emphasis on the overall story rather than what's happening moment to moment," she reasons. "It's like a trilogy of movies, and it's been interesting setting up what's coming in the second book." **SJ**

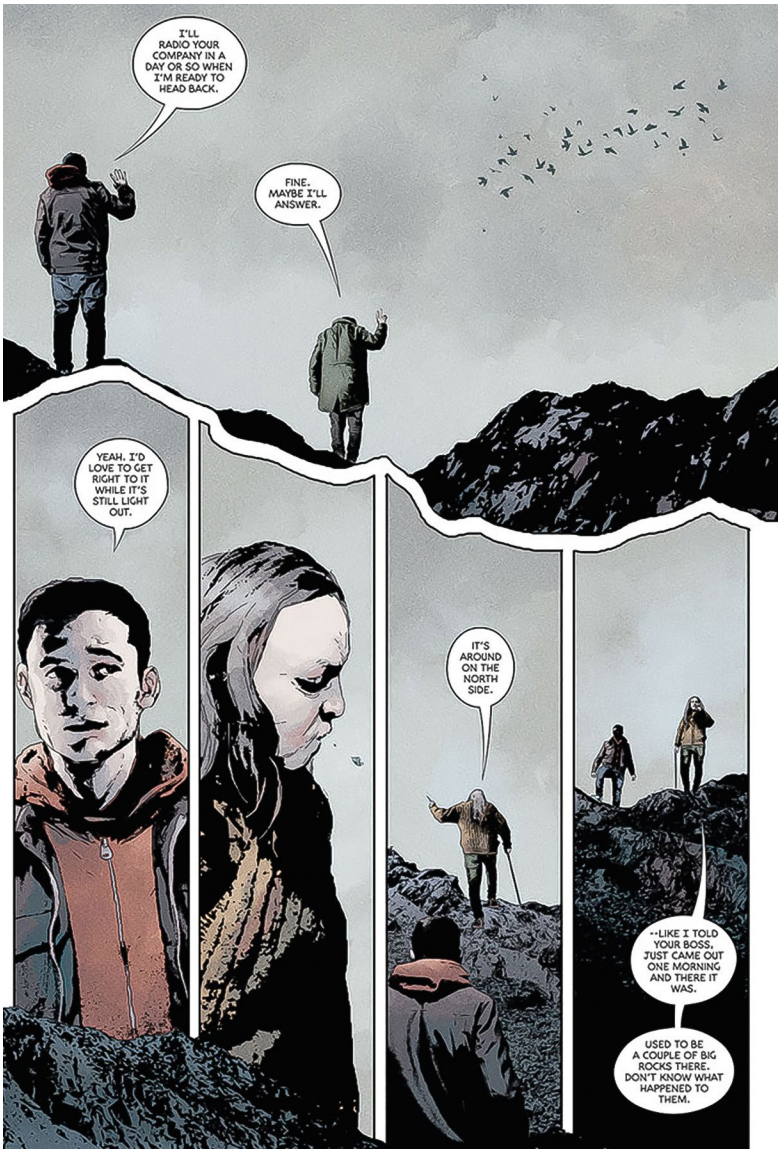
Clementine Book One is out on 22 June.

SCI-FACT! ***Gideon Falls*** **is being developed for television by Hivemind Productions, with James Wan attached as executive producer.**

CREATORS EXCLUSIVE

Strange Fruit

Jeff Lemire and Andrea Sorrentino launch their own shared universe with the **Bone Orchard Mythos**



AFTER PREVIOUSLY teaming up on everything from *Old Man Logan* to their recent creator-owned series like *Primordial* and *Mazebook*, Jeff Lemire and Andrea Sorrentino are taking their collaboration to the next level by establishing their own shared universe. Beginning with a short prelude in this year's Image Comics Free Comic Book Day offering before continuing in graphic novel *The Passageway*, the Bone Orchard Mythos rose out of the pair's desire to concentrate on shorter narratives.

"Once we started planning the first books, it was almost natural to start thinking about something that could link them all together," explains Sorrentino. "The books definitely share a similar approach in terms of how they tackle the horror genre and its tropes, so we knew all these stories could have a common thread, and the mythology behind the horrors we'll see in these stories can have a common root.

"We started building a whole mythology," he continues, "and wrote lines that link all the projects at a point that is now growing into something even bigger than we ever planned. There's a whole backstory that goes from basically the origin of the species to the far future, a hierarchy of powers that move events from behind the scenes, and the more we envision the new stories, the more pieces of this we're giving to the readers. *The Passageway* just scratches the surface of this whole mythology, but there's a lot more that will be shown in the next books."

With Sorrentino describing it as "existential horror", the Bone Orchard Mythos taps into the pair's mutual love of the genre. "It's an aspect of horror that finds its roots in themes like isolation, memories, guilt, intimate fears and a dreaded atmosphere, more than in graphic violence or gore," he explains. "Many of my favourite horror productions, from movies like *Alien*, *The Witch* or *Midsommar* to the novels of Edgar Allan Poe and HP Lovecraft, are filled with this kind of atmosphere, and this is what I want to bring to this universe."



"I think we have a pretty strong voice as a creative team at this point and that style and point of view that we've brought to our other series like *Gideon Falls* will definitely carry over to the Bone Orchard Mythos," adds Lemire, referring to their long-running Image series. "This won't feel like a continuation of *Gideon Falls*, but there are certainly plenty of stylistic and tonal similarities."

Centring on a geologist who is sent to a remote lighthouse to investigate strange phenomena, *The Passageway* will be followed by five-issue miniseries *Ten Thousand Black Feathers* and a second graphic novel, *Tenement*. "*Ten Thousand Feathers* is about the friendship of two women growing up in a small industrial town and the dark fantasy world they create to escape the emptiness of their everyday lives, while *Tenement* is about the residents of an old apartment building that may or may not intersect with another realm," reveals Lemire.

He is reluctant to elaborate on exactly how the different stories connect together. "Part of the fun of doing this is allowing the reader to discover the connections naturally as they read the books," he teases. "Some of them will be obvious, but others will require some detective work." **SJ**

Bone Orchard: The Passageway is out on 15 June.

SCI-FACT! **In 2005 a cartoon version of George Pérez cameoed in the *Teen Titans* animated series.**

NEW AUTHOR

CLAY HARMON

MEET THE MARKETING SPECIALIST BEHIND FANTASY NOVEL *FLAMES OF MIRA*



PHOTO SQUARE

Tell us about your protagonist.
→ Ig is forced to work as an assassin for a corrupt ruler, and bound to them in a way that if he disobeys, the magic tying them together will kill him. His story is about corruption of absolute power, using freedom for purpose, and coping mechanisms for trauma.

How does magic work in this world?
→ It's based off the periodic table. People endure dangerous binding rituals that allow them to bind with chemical elements. The more elements they're bound to, the more compounds of those elements they can control.



Did the book have any particular inspiration?
→ The main character came to me while reading Brandon Sanderson's Stormlight Archive. The world, which is primarily subterranean, was inspired by the videogame *Terraria*, which has this vibrant, colourful ecosystem.

Did you have to do much research?
→ It was primarily focused on chemistry and electromagnetism. I hate hand-waving my world-building, so I brushed up on geology, diets to survive underground, and weather on frozen, tidally-locked planets...

Any advice for readers who are budding authors?
→ Never stop reading. I have to fight with myself to sacrifice some of my writing time so that I read regularly, but it's always worth it. **IB**

Flames Of Mira is out on 7 July, published by Solaris Books.

THE FINAL FRONTIER

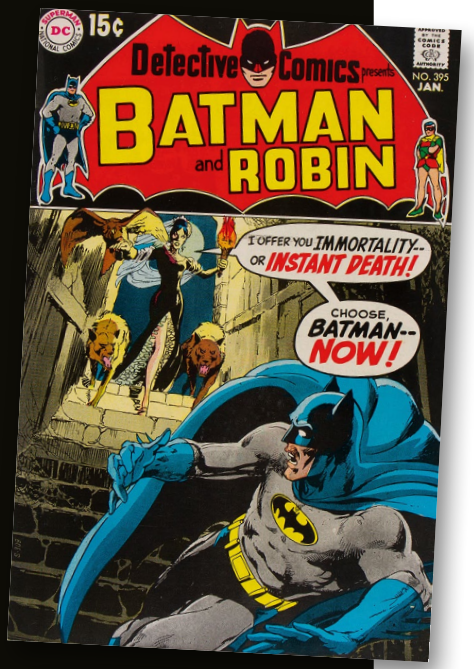
REMEMBERING TWO TITANS OF COMIC BOOKS

NEAL ADAMS 1941-2022

New York-born artist Neal Adams was one of the key creatives in Batman history, defining the Dark Knight's enduring image as a brooding creature of the night.

Adams had a background in commercial art and brought that sleek, photorealist style to comics, a thrilling burst of modernism that shook up the industry in the 1960s. He collaborated with writer Dennis O'Neil on a run that returned Batman to his gothic/noir roots, overwriting the colourful but faddish TV series and securing the character's ongoing popularity. Adams and O'Neil also teamed on *Green Arrow/Green Lantern*, gaining acclaim for socially progressive stories that reflected the turbulent America of the times.

With credits on Marvel's *X-Men* and 1978's *Superman Vs Muhammad Ali*, Adams was a vocal advocate for creators' rights, winning a long overdue pension and recognition for *Superman*'s Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster.



GEORGE PÉREZ 1954-2022

Renowned for a detailed, dynamic art style, George Pérez had a gift for choreographing multiple characters that made him a perfect fit for such superhero team titles as *The Avengers* and *The New Teen Titans*.

Born in New York City, he was entirely self-taught, making his pro debut on Marvel's *Astonishing Tales* issue 25 in 1974. Popular runs on *The Avengers* and *Fantastic Four* established him as a fan fave.

Launched in 1980, *The New Teen Titans* was DC's counterstrike to the success of Marvel's *The Uncanny X-Men*. It went on to become the best-selling comic in the burgeoning direct sales market. Pérez reteamed with writer Marv Wolfman on 1985 event series *Crisis On Infinite Earths*, a cosmic epic that reforged decades of DC continuity, and revamped *Wonder Woman* in 1987.

"I was born to be a comic book artist," he said in 1982. "And when I love what I do, I produce the best work." **NS**



FRED WARD 1942-2022

American actor who starred in *Tremors* and *Tremors 2* as well as 1985's *Remo Williams: The Adventure Begins*.

KENNETH WELSH 1942-2022

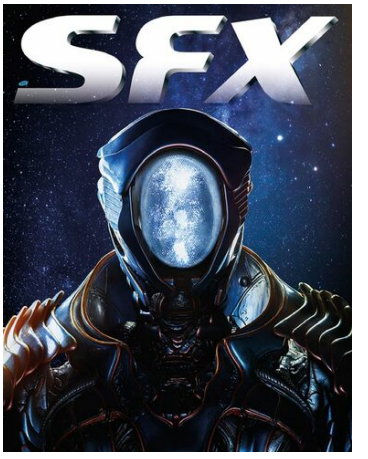
Canadian actor best known for portraying the villainous Windom Earle in the original *Twin Peaks*.

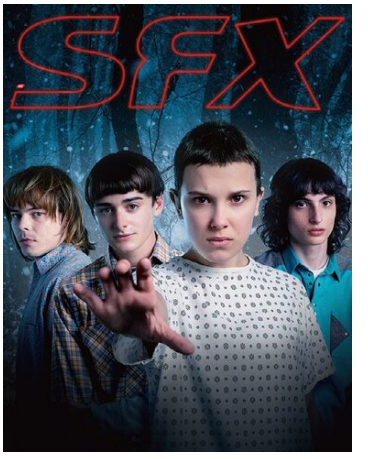
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FAMILY

THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY ARE BACK – BUT THERE ARE SPARROWS IN THEIR NEST IN SEASON THREE...

WORDS: **BRYAN CAIRNS**



AFFAIR

NETFLIX, GETTY



Klaus just won't shut up about getting the top bunk.



Viktor and Allison have a llittle heart to heart.

THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY established one steadfast rule for time travel: expect the unexpected. After preventing the assassination of John F Kennedy and averting an apocalypse in 1963, the TV series' second season culminated with the seven superpowered Hargreeves siblings – Luther (Tom Hopper), Viktor (Elliot Page), Diego (David Castañeda), Allison (Emmy Raver-Lampman), Klaus (Robert Sheehan), Five (Aidan Gallagher) and Ben (Justin H Min) – relieved to be transported back to the present day. But they've somehow royally screwed up the timeline. Their supposedly deceased father, Sir Reginald (Colm Feore), is alive and kicking. And intruders have taken up residence in their mansion. WTF?

"Season two consisted more of solo stories, where they kind of come together," showrunner Steve Blackman tells *SFX*. "It was important to me that they started together and they had a common foe. It was about coming back to the family as an emotional unit, as a fighting unit, and to see how they have evolved from the first time we met them, after being apart for 15 years since they separated as a young superhero family."

Perhaps worst of all, a corporeal Ben that everyone can see – manifesting similar tentacle-like abilities – has now sided with these strangers, and has no recollection of his original family. In this timeline, Ben is Number Two instead of Number Six in the Umbrella Academy. And, as Allison points out in the trailer, "he's a complete dickhead."

"Clearly, there is a reason Ben is back," Blackman teases. "We know in the previous seasons, Ben did not survive from when they were young. There was some accident or something happened to him, which hopefully we will have time to dig more into as we go into →



Big daddy: Colm Feore as Reginald Hargreeves.



LOVE BIZARRE

Robert Sheehan talks sci-fi man crushes

This looks like it could be the best season yet. How do you feel about it?
I feel the same way. I know it sounds like bullshit, but it's true. Whatever the grain of the show is, whatever the spirit of the show is, feels most unobstructed this season. The show gets off to a flying start. The momentum is there from the first second. The comedy is there. The relationships are so engrained in the viewer, at this point.

Season three opens with the Umbrella Academy back in the present day and intruders in their house. What does Klaus make of the Sparrows?
I don't think he has any opinion on it, really. He's just been through two different timelines. The absurd is his normal, is his cornflakes. There might be an initial shock, but he probably has so much defence mechanism built up in himself that he doesn't allow the shock to knock him over too much. I think what does knock him over, though, is seeing Ben, alive and well, and his heart beating. As someone who has done a large amount of drugs, he's going to wonder whether or not he's hallucinating. He's been talking to the ghost version of this person for the last 18 years.

The Hargreeves' adventures almost serve as therapy sessions for them. What issues is Klaus working through this season?
The first season saw Klaus just chasing drugs, chasing oblivion. And by chasing drugs, he was running away from ghosts and his abilities and the thing that made him feel the most terrified he ever has in his life. In the second season, we saw him running away from his cult, which was this giant clingy problem that he created in 1963. In the third season, he doesn't have anything to run away from. As the series goes on, there's a right amount of him trying to attach to something, and really not knowing which way to turn.

Klaus and Five go on a road trip. What was interesting about pairing those two together?
Like a lot of the pairings, we haven't seen that one before, just the two of them. It's new territory really for the audience. We get to go on an incredibly odd journey together, a very strange and personal mission for Klaus.

From day one, you have received plenty of praise for your portrayal of Klaus. He's certainly resonated with the LGBTQ+ community. What does that mean to you?
It means good things. It's nice going to a convention and young LGBTQ+ folk coming up to me and telling me how much Klaus meant to them. It's heartwarming. It warms my soul. If Klaus strikes a chord with any being, it's a wonderful thing. It means you have done something right.

You have plenty of genre credits under your belt. Who do you consider your sci-fi or fantasy man crush?
I will say I saw a *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* poster floating around on a bus in Dublin. I saw the first one and the commitment that Jim Carrey gives is off the chain. I could watch Jim Carrey read the phone book. I'd watch Jim Carrey file his toenails. He's my sci-fi man crush.



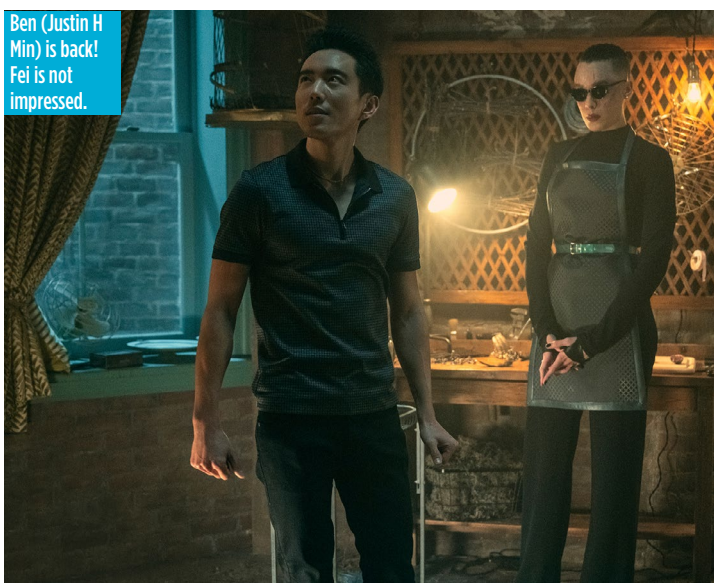
> "In the third season, Klaus doesn't have anything to run away from"



Tom Hopper as Luther with Elliot Page as Viktor.



Sloane and Jayme of the Sparrows: boo, hiss!



Ben (Justin H Min) is back! Fei is not impressed.

this season. In this timeline, he obviously plays a far bigger role. Something has shifted majorly in the timeline for that to have happened."

Season three picks up moments after the Umbrella Academy has arrived back home, only to discover that they've been replaced by the Sparrows. The new superhero team – born on the same day as their counterparts and adopted by Sir Reginald – consists of Marcus (Justin Cornwell), Ben, Fei (Britne Oldford), Sloane (Genesis Rodriguez), Alphonso (Jake Epstein), Jayme (Cazzie David) and Christopher, an Existential Dread Inducing Psykronium Cube.

The two groups immediately clash, and it becomes abundantly clear that the Umbrella Academy are outclassed and outgunned. "For the first time, the Umbrella Academy have a common foe from the start of the season, and they are together in the start of the season," Blackman says. "I learned, and from the fans, that the show seems to fire on all cylinders when they are all together. As much as they are wonderful people as individuals, and the fun, self-deprecating way they put each other down, deep down we know they love each other when they are together. It's a lot of fun for the audience to watch.

"But I really wanted them to meet their match and, without giving too much away, the Sparrows will be a challenge for them this season," he continues. "They will be forced to put aside some of the old hang-ups that we've seen in season one and two, and really see why they would have been a great team had they not broken up when they were young. We get to see maybe what the Umbrella Academy could have been if they hadn't split up."



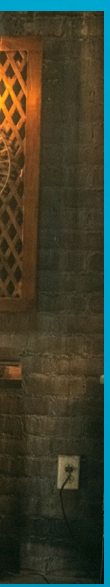
Ben's been hanging out the wrong crowd.

In one extremely personal arc, art imitates life. In 2020, Page revealed they were non-binary and, eventually, transgender. That will be addressed in the series as Vanya transitions early on. The character will be known as Viktor and employ he/him/his pronouns. Details surrounding how and when it happens, or how he breaks the news to his brothers and sisters, remain under wraps.

But in crafting Viktor's coming out story, Blackman notes that consulting Page and the organisation GLAAD, among others, was paramount. "I talked with the wonderful Nick Adams at GLAAD," Blackman explains. "I also enlisted a writer named Thomas Page McBee for his guidance. Elliot Page was always a part of it, to ensure the storyline was authentic and do it with sensitivity.

"It was very collaborative. I thought it was an incredible experience. It was very educational for me, as well. →





MUSCLE MAN

Tom Hopper dishes on a lovestruck Luther

The Umbrella Academy is back in the present... Except the present day is rubbish. In what ways is the introduction of the Sparrows a game-changer for the Hargreeves?
It's obviously changed everything. There's an element of, "Oh well, the pressure is off. We can just get on with our lives in this world. Who cares if we don't have the actual academy? We don't need to be there." The only person massively affected is Allison, because her daughter doesn't exist in this world. For myself, Klaus and Five, we're like, "We can just crack on." What you realise is the introduction of this world will cause a lot of problems.

How has it been exploring a lighter, more romantic side of Luther?
Luther has been on quite a journey in terms of finding himself again. In season one, he was a bit of a social recluse. He had been on the Moon for four years. He was dealing with all sorts of depression and dad issues. In the '60s, I think he managed to figure out who Luther is a bit more. We now start to see who Luther really is without the pressure of being Number One. Underneath it all, he wants to have fun. He's living out his teenage years a little bit this season. He has let a lot of the Umbrella hang-ups go.

At the same time, does it feel like Luther and his siblings are a closer unit than ever?
I think so. They've been through a lot. They realise they need each other now. They realise they're stronger together. It's quite nice to have that. In scenes, as a dynamic, they are more enjoyable. They are supporting each other. They still annoy the piss out of each other and they are still siblings, but they are ultimately there for each other.

What do you believe Luther's biggest challenge or hurdle is this year?
It's the thing unfolding with Sloane. As you start to build that relationship, it's the pressures of dealing with that dynamic at the same time as keeping his family happy.

Much of *The Umbrella Academy* revolves around being "othered" and a found family, which resonates with queer people. How aware are you of those comparisons?
I think we are very aware of it. It's part of the storyline this year. Outside of that, there are various different characteristics of each of the characters that are very relatable. I think a lot of people in the queer community have commented to me about growing up as outcasts and feeling they don't belong. I think that's a huge part of it. The Umbrella Academy are fundamentally those people.

How much LGBTQ+ fandom have you experienced from your *Merlin* days?
A fair amount. I feel like I have always tried to embrace the gay community. I have so many friends in that community. It has been a huge part of my career, in general. I'm not sure whether it was the whole "brotherhood of the knights". We did gay magazine covers with the other knights for *Merlin*. They seemed to crank a good fanbase out of that community. We were all for it.



> "He's living out his teenage years a little bit this season"



Luther gets all aggy with the Sparrows' Marcus.



They may be heroes but they're bad at pool.

But it was important that Elliot was happy and that we could work together with GLAAD and this other writer, to really make it honest and real. I think we did just that.

"There is an instinct to make it a bigger story point," he adds. "But in conversations with Elliot, Nick and Thomas, we all came to the idea that it should be organic. And one of the things this family does right is they accept each other in a very kind way."



What's going on with Lila Pitts (Ritu Arya)?



Viktor and Marcus try to hash things out.

FOUND FAMILY

The Umbrella Academy, celebrates diversity. The remarkable cast consists of males, females, LGBTQ+, Mexican, Korean, Black and white... It's all-inclusive in this world.

"Myself and the team are incredibly proud of what we have in this show," Blackman offers. "It's important to mirror real life and I think this really does mirror real life. We are sending a positive message to this generation of kids watching this, and the people who are not kids watching this. It's been a great experience for all of us. We love the different things everyone brings to the table. It's a joy to work with all these people."

Another fun aspect of the show is the score. Audiences were first treated to the Umbrella Academy busting a move to Tiffany's retro classic – itself a cover of an older song – "I Think We're Alone Now". Blackman considers music to be an important part of the writing process and as a result, catchy tunes have been woven into the fabric of the series. Whether anyone will be grooving to more Tiffany falls into spoiler territory, but it's a safe bet that a fight sequence or dramatic moment will boast a familiar pop hit or two.

"I just love music," says Blackman. "It's such an important part of my life. Music helps to evoke certain emotional connections that you have, remembering a song that you heard before and what you were doing. Sometimes I try to subvert the expectations of how a song should connect to a scene. And sometimes a song is the right emotional cue for a scene. I just love putting it in the show. I tend to go heavy on the '80s because it's my generation."

No matter how hard they try to do the right thing, the Umbrella Academy always gets shafted in the series' finales. Season one ended with Five blinking away the family to an unknown time period only a second before an apocalyptic energy swept over the planet. Last year saw the introduction of the Sparrows. And whetting viewers' appetites, Blackman promises a jaw-dropping cliffhanger in season three. Yes, again.

"Oh no, they won't have a break this year," Blackman teases. "It's another mega-cliffhanger. I am hopeful if we get a season four we will be able to pay it off as we did this year. It's a monstrous cliffhanger. It will leave people's mouths agape. And it will make you long for the next season.

"I have a very good handle on season four," he concludes, with a glint in his eye. "No season four has been ordered, but I know what it is, where it starts and where it finishes. It's bold. It will be a challenge to pull off, but I think our fans will lose their minds in the best way."



Allison, Diego and Klaus see a Magic Eye for the first time.

The Umbrella Academy is on Netflix from 22 June.





VIKTORIOUS TRANSITIONS

Elliot Page on Viktor coming into his own

Where do we find Viktor this season?
We've seen Viktor learn and change from the first to the second season, and now he has emerged, evolved and grown into a fully-formed person versus when we first met him. This season, he continues on his journey and faces a lot of obstacles. It's a continued journey of learning more and more about who he is, and finding his strength and courage to be more of a leader.

Who are the Sparrows, and what kind of threat do they pose?
The Sparrows, who were introduced at the end of the second season, are a bit of a record scratch. As we've discovered, Hargreeves – upon meeting his children in the '60s – realises they were, quite frankly, a bit of a mess and decides to take a different course of action to have a better team than the Umbrellas. He creates a new superhero group called the Sparrows and they're very good, and they've trained a long time together. So we might be in a bit of trouble.

What does your character think of the not-so-sweet Ben this season?
There's so much heartbreak to it because there's incredible excitement and relief to see Ben – this person that they love – especially after Viktor just had this major moment with him at the end of season two. When it's revealed what kind of person Ben is, who is not the nicest guy, I wouldn't say they're the biggest fans of him.

This season, Viktor is reeling from having lost a love. How does that weigh on your character?
It weighs a lot to start the episode with a broken heart and a lot of grief, and hope that he'd be able to see Sissy and Harlan again. I think Viktor definitely feels a sense of responsibility. Did he make the right choice? Did he, in fact, abandon them when he thought he was making them feel safe? So I think a lot of these things weigh heavily throughout the season.

Let's talk about the storyline between Allison and Viktor.
Things really do come to a head, because Viktor thinks he's doing the right thing by not sharing certain information, which ultimately ends up feeling like a betrayal for Allison – and rightfully so. A lot of stuff comes up about Allison and her anger towards Viktor that I don't think she ever felt like she was allowed to feel. They have a lot to work through, understandably, and I think both carry a lot of resentment towards each other. This season, a big part of it is how will they manage to work through that.

What kind of stunt training went into that brawl scene in the first episode?
I did some fun wire stuff and got dropped on a table, and all that – I really enjoy that. Well, don't tell them that because then I'd be up in wires all the time and then I'd regret saying it! But I do really enjoy all that fun. I'm a rollercoaster guy, so put me on wires and throw me around, and drop me. I'm into that.



> "I did some fun wire stuff and got dropped on a table, and all that"



SUPERPOWER COUPLE

FROM THEIR FIRST KISS TO GETTING MARRIED, HULKLING AND WICCAN HAVE MADE MINE MARVEL FOR GAY SUPERHEROES

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WITH THEIR TEAM BOOK *Young Avengers*' original tagline of "They're not what you think", Hulkling and Wiccan – aka Teddy Roosevelt and Billy Kaplan – have always boasted the ability to surprise. Quickly shrugging off their initial status as junior counterparts of Earth's Mightiest Heroes, Teddy rose to the challenge of heading up the new Kree/Skrull Alliance in 2020's *Empyre*, even finding the time to marry Billy not once but twice over the course of the six-issue event series.

"One of the tricks that was baked into *Young Avengers* from the start was the idea that on the surface these characters would all look like one thing, with one affiliation, but would soon be revealed to be a different thing entirely, with a different affiliation," explains Marvel Executive Editor Tom Brevoort.

"So Billy started out as Asgardian, with a design that was somewhat more Thor-influenced, and it was only over time that we revealed that he was really connected to the Scarlet Witch, not Thor. Teddy, too, superficially resembles the Hulk, but we come to learn that his real Avengers connection is through his father, Captain Mar-Vell."

Alongside teammates such as Kate Bishop's Hawkeye, Hulkling and Wiccan made their debut in the pages of April 2005's *Young Avengers* issue one, written by *The OC* scriptwriter Allan Heinberg and drawn by Jim Cheung. Hulkling was at first conceived of as the opposite sex. "Allan pitched Teddy as a female shapeshifter called Chimera who would adopt a male guise, as he wasn't sure that he'd be permitted to do an openly gay character at that point," recalls Brevoort. "But after playing with it for a little while, he told me that he preferred to make Hulkling both male and gay. We had some internal conversations about this and got the sign-off to proceed. Allan being who he was definitely helped in getting the go-ahead, as the comic book world was still very averse to diversity in sexuality at that time. While there were a few gay superheroes, they were still few and far between."

As a consequence, Heinberg initially downplayed the precise nature of Teddy and Billy's relationship. "I don't think Allan was looking to make waves or cause trouble," explains Brevoort. "He wanted to tell the story of the characters genuinely and honestly, but not to do so loudly or aggressively. So we took our time on that romance, as we might with any heterosexual romance, and it seemed to work. There were questions as to when and in what context Marvel might be comfortable with depicting two men kissing. But the audience definitely got it and was into the developing relationship pretty much from the start."

> **"The comic book world was still very averse to diversity in sexuality at that time"**



Heinberg and Cheung finally delivered that decisive moment in 2010's *Avengers: The Children's Crusade* issue nine. "It was really just about moving the relationship forward in a natural fashion, as it had been several years by that point," continues Brevoort. "It just seemed like a natural development, so I don't think we were thinking about the larger world so much as what made sense for the characters."

LEVEL UP

Launched as part of the Marvel NOW! initiative, Hulkling and Wiccan and their fellow teen heroes moved up an age group, if not another level, with 2011's second volume of *Young Avengers*. This reunited writer Kieron Gillen with artist Jamie McKelvie, who had previously collaborated on Image's creator-owned series *Phonogram*.

"When [then Marvel editor-in-chief] Axel Alonso asked if I was interested in taking over the book, I said no, as *Young Avengers* was a great book, but I was aware that its neo-classical Marvel approach just wasn't what I did," reflects Gillen. "Axel said to chew it over and get back to him, as they were looking for radical takes on the books.

"I sat back and came up with an angle I liked, which was that if the first volume was about being 16 then doing a book about being 18 would be interesting, and the way to do it →





> **“Now that we’ve shown things working, they can start to fall apart if we want them to”**

was to bring over the *Phonogram* team. One of the lines we used was ‘We’ll pretend we own it’. It was us trying to do an indie pop book at Marvel, using that whole skillset to make it look and feel like nothing else.”

“It’s clear that, for a modern generation, readers are more familiar with and enamoured of Kieron and Jamie’s *Young Avengers* than the earlier series we did,” adds Brevoort. “Their approach definitely resonated and touched a nerve, and I’m sure in part that was due to the fact that they depicted a wider span of queer relationships within the series during their tenure than Allan and Jim did. That said, they were building on the foundation that Allan and Jim had set up, pushing it all forward.”

TILL DEATH US DO PART

With stalwart Kate Bishop joined by newcomers Kid Loki, America “Ms America” Chavez and Marvel Boy, aka Noh-Varr, Hulkling and Wiccan’s burgeoning relationship was the beating heart of the book. “Their love was the backbone of the story, and the complexities with the rest of the team was absolutely where we got a lot of our story from,” says Gillen. “Even the most distant part of the plot, such as Kate and Noh-Varr’s romance, was meant as a compare and contrast to Billy and Teddy’s, in how their love fails while Billy and Teddy’s lasts.”



Not that there weren’t bumps in the road, such as when Teddy unexpectedly kissed erstwhile X-Man Prodigy, who had just revealed his bisexuality. “We wanted to give them some messy teenage experiences,” laughs Gillen. “Let them be imperfect and learn to be better through it, make a pig’s ear of things and then piece it all together.”

While it was radically contemporary, Gillen and McKelvie’s *Young Avengers* was definitely in keeping with the down-to-earth, relatable depiction of superheroes that Stan Lee, Steve Ditko and Jack Kirby first pioneered in the ’60s.

“That’s the Marvel approach – they’re superhuman, sure, but they’re human first and foremost,” says Gillen, whose run on *Young Avengers* wrapped up in 2014 after 15 issues. “When making *Young Avengers*, we wanted to really lean into that. Structurally, we removed a lot of the middle register of superhero comics – the procedural, adventure-y stuff – in favour of focusing on the more human stuff. We were more interested in the team going to a diner for breakfast than anything else.”

Beginning in 2019’s end-of-year special *Incoming* before continuing in 2020 event book *Empyre*, Teddy and Billy faced their most formidable challenge to date when Hulkling was anointed emperor of the new Kree/Skrull Alliance, prompting them to finally secretly tie the knot a decade after first getting engaged in





2010's *Avengers: Children's Crusade* issue nine. "The idea for them to get married came from Joe Quesada at one of our editorial summits, as we were talking about *Empyre* and how Billy and Teddy would have to be separated after one last night together," explains Brevoort. "It was Joe who suggested that, like historically when one romantic partner was going off to war, maybe they took that evening to cement their bonds and their relationship by getting married."

"I just thought it was time we either did it or got off the pot, as they're both in their early twenties and can get married if they want," adds Al Ewing, who co-scripted *Empyre* with Dan Slott for artist Valerio Schiti. "It also meant that we could do something rare and have a cliffhanger that was about a nice surprise instead of a nasty one."

After the main series concluded, Billy and Teddy subsequently celebrated in style with second nuptials in *Empyre: Aftermath Avengers* issue one. "They couldn't just have a Vegas wedding, which I knew right away," laughs Ewing. "And I was right, because the reaction to that Vegas wedding from a lot of quarters was, 'That's it? That's all we get?' So, giving them the full-on Jewish space wedding with all their old teammates and the Avengers and toasts to Mar-Vell and so on was very necessary. When Marvel heroes get wed, they get Marvel weddings!"

Ewing subsequently included Teddy and Billy in his line-up for 2020's *Guardians Of The Galaxy* relaunch. "What I didn't want to happen was to have them go off to space and vanish there forever, or to go off and do nothing and then come back and say, 'That didn't work out'," he continues. "Having put all the work into their new status quo, we had to make use of it. But now that we've shown things working, they can start to fall apart if we want them to."

ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES

Teddy and Billy are shown enjoying married life in this month's *Hulkling And Wiccan* issue one (initially released as an online Infinity comic), by writer Josh Trujillo and artist Jodi Nishijima. "Telling queer stories is central to my work, and Hulkling and Wiccan are the most prominent queer characters in all of comics, so it really is an honour to get to write them!" says Trujillo, who previously co-created the gay Captain of the Railways in last year's *The United States Of Captain America*.

"The Young Avengers, and Billy and Teddy in particular, hit me at the perfect time. I was a closeted teenager just getting back into comics and having two young gay characters on a super-team felt revolutionary. I don't think it's possible to overstate how important Wiccan and Hulkling are to fans who got to see themselves in comics for the first time, and I've been hooked ever since."

The 48-page *Possibilities* is almost a kitchen sink drama, as it opens with Teddy and Billy inviting Northstar and his husband Kyle Jinadu – who married in 2012's *Astonishing X-Men* issue 51 – to their orbiting satellite home for dinner.

"Kyle and Northstar have been at this longer than anyone, so they have a lot they can teach Billy and Teddy," adds Trujillo. "We so rarely see queer superheroes interact outside of spandex, and this was the perfect opportunity to do that."

Hulkling And Wiccan issue one and Marvel's Voices: Pride 2022 are out on 15 June.



DYNAMIC DUO

CHARLIE JANE ANDERS ON INTRODUCING TRANS MUTANTS ESCAPADE AND MORGAN RED TO THE MARVEL UNIVERSE

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

JUST AS LAST YEAR'S SPECIAL introduced Somnus, the 20-page lead feature of this month's *Marvel's Voices: Pride* issue one features the debut of not one but two brand-new LGBTQ+ heroes in trans mutants Shela Sexton, aka Escapade, and her constant companion Morgan Red.

"I'd been talking to the Marvel folks for a long time about creating a new character – or set of characters – and I was so overjoyed that the stars finally aligned," says writer Charlie Jane Anders. "A lot of stuff about Shela and Morgan has been percolating for years, but collaborating with [editors] Sarah Brunstad and Anita Okoye, and artists Ted Brandt and Ro Stein made everything so much better and cooler."

NO ALLEGORY

A novelist whose books include 2016's *All The Birds In The Sky* and 2019's *The City In The Middle Of The Night*, Anders has also previously penned a Punisher tale for 2019's *War Of The Realms: War Scrolls* issue three, and teamed up Squirrel Girl and Black Widow for this year's *Women Of Marvel* anthology. "I've loved comics for a very long time and have dabbled in comics writing on and off for years," she says. "I've pitched comics projects in the past that have ended up not happening for some reason, but there's so much cool stuff you can do in comics, story-wise."

As alluded to by her mutant moniker, Stela's abilities are circumstance-based, allowing her to swap places with another person, whether it be a bank robber or a politician. "That superpower is something I came up with probably five years ago, as I dreamed it up when I first started talking to Marvel," recalls Anders. "It just always felt like a really neat power that I hadn't quite seen before, with a lot of storytelling potential. Escapade is a name that Anita came up with, and it just conveys 'adventure' and possibly 'getting away with it by the skin of your teeth.' I've never felt like superhero characters should have names that reflect their powers: imagine if Mr Fantastic was called Mr Stretch instead!"

Anders is wary about Stela's mutant status being seen as some sort of allegory for being trans. "Whenever you have a fantastical story about superheroes, but also about space travel or fantasy adventures, it's going to provide lots of metaphors for transformations and challenges going on in real life," she reasons. "Most of my stories, one way or another, are about people figuring out who they are and who they want to be, and making choices and going through changes. That inevitably connects up to my own experiences as a trans person, but also just a human being."

Stating "I'm all about relationships, as a writer," Anders says that the strong bond between Stela and Morgan – who is a transmasc non-binary person – is an essential part of their partnership, along with the genetically engineered flying turtle, Hibbert. "I find it much easier to get invested in characters who have really strong, dynamic relationships rather than people who are just on their own," she admits. "Stela's relationship with Morgan just anchors the whole story emotionally. And now I've seen Ted and Ro's artwork for Hibbert, I would die for him!"



Like Somnus before her, the Children of the Atom was a natural home for Stela and Morgan – given titles like *Uncanny X-Men*'s long-standing championing of different oppressed groups – even if they don't necessarily agree with the ruling Quiet Council's current controversial policies.

"For sure, making Escapade a mutant was an interesting way of thinking about people having more than one type of marginalisation," says Anders. "But also, it just allows her to be part of one of the most colourful, rich and fascinating corners of the Marvel universe. And, yeah, sending someone who has problems with authority to Krakoa automatically felt like a fun time."

While Somnus is now part of the Marauders, Stela is set to appear in a forthcoming arc of *New Mutants*, which Anders is currently scripting. "It's a total joy to get to write more of these characters," she enthuses. "I'm very hopeful that these three issues won't be the end of my association with Stela and with the X-Men generally. Getting to write scenes where Stela interacts with Emma Frost and other mutant icons is amazing, and Stela's dynamic with Emma was one of the most fun parts of the book to write."

Marvel's Voices: Pride is out on 15 June.



BLOOD BROTHERS

HOME TO THE FIRST TRANS SUPERHERO, *BLOOD SYNDICATE* IS DC'S UNSUNG LGBTQ+ TEAM BOOK NO LONGER

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

CENTRING ON A GANG OF multiracial superhumans, *Blood Syndicate* proved to be truly groundbreaking when it first appeared in April 1993, changing the way that not only people of various ethnicities but also different sexualities were depicted in mainstream American comics.

It was created by writers Dwayne McDuffie and Ivan Velez Jr and artist Denys Cowan as part of the Milestone Universe, aka the Dakotaverse – an independent line of titles created by a coalition of African-American writers and artists that was published by DC Comics. Now *Blood Syndicate* has returned three decades later as part of *Milestone Returns*, a new range of books coordinated by Cowan and Reginald Hudlin.

"*Blood Syndicate* had multiple queer characters of different persuasions and points of view, which was something that hadn't been done before," recalls Geoffrey Thorne, who is scripting the six-issue *Blood Syndicate: Season One* for artist ChrisCross. "All of that was done in a sort of throwaway way by Ivan Velez Jr, who wrote the original characters like, 'Here we are on Paris Island, and these are the people who live here'.

"Because it was the '90s, there were a lot of things going on in the real world that got reflected in *Blood Syndicate* in ways that the *X-Men* never did. The X-Men never actually talked about AIDS; they created the Legacy virus as something that could allude to AIDS as a metaphor. But in *Blood Syndicate*, if you're a crack addict, you're a crack addict. There was no meta-gene hormone, it was just crack. That sort of frankness, back in the day, was very refreshing and cutting-edge, and so I've definitely made sure to keep that aspect in the sense that this is who these people are, so just take it or leave it."

Boasting the ability to fly and to pass through solid objects, the Blood Syndicate's most prominent LGBTQ+ member is Carlos Quinones Jr, aka Fade, who like Marvel's Miles Morales – who first wall-crawled nearly 20 years later in 2011 – is of mixed African-American/Hispanic heritage. "It's been 30 years and I didn't want to do that long-suffering, in-love-with-a-straight-boy trope," insists Thorne. "I don't want to have any long-suffering queer people in there. They will have their problems, but they will be suffering because of other issues and not because they're queer. I wanted to have that sort of frankness in the book, and Reggie and Denys were like, 'Great, update!'

> **"Fade, who was closeted in the original Blood Syndicate, is now an out gay character"**



FADE TO GAY

Having previously hidden his true self from those around him, Fade is no longer as repressed as he was in past incarnations. "Fade, who was closeted in the original *Blood Syndicate*, is now an out gay character," continues Thorne.

"Fade is very much himself, so he will talk about his relationships in the same way you or I will talk about our relationships, and I feel that to present it like that is very much the way it is in my actual life. My circle of friends and my family operate in that way, and – as a straight man – I am simply presenting that experience of the queer community that I've experienced over my life, and that is being reflected in the book."

Given the homophobic views of Blood Syndicate's leader Wise Son, aka Hannibal White (as witnessed in *Season One*), Fade is perhaps right to be wary. "Wise is a person who has had a lot of bad data put into his head from various sources," reasons Thorne. "He's had a sort of battlefield conversion to Islam, and in the original *Blood Syndicate*, he was already a member of the Nation of →





Islam, which was great for the '90s because people didn't know what the Nation of Islam was at the time. But what I want to do with Wise Son is to ask, 'What does it mean to be a Muslim?' because there are many different types of Muslims. So, he starts out with lots of bad-ass viewpoints, which he is never allowed to get away with, so he has a certain amount of friction with Fade, and they squabble.

"In *Season One*, there's, like, a trio of main characters – Wise Son, Fade and Tech-9 – and Tech is like the glue that allows the three-way friendship to work. If he did not exist, Fade and Wise would not be close to each other. What I want to show is the progression of a person from one mindset to another, which means Wise has to start off in the bad place."

Blood Syndicate also included the first transgender character in mainstream comics in shapeshifter Masquerade, whose debut in April 1993's issue one predated Rachel Pollack and Scott Eaton's Coagula (who debuted in September 1993's *Doom Patrol* issue 70) by five months. "I loved the idea of Masquerade at the time," recalls Thorne of the character, who was also the first superheroic trans man.

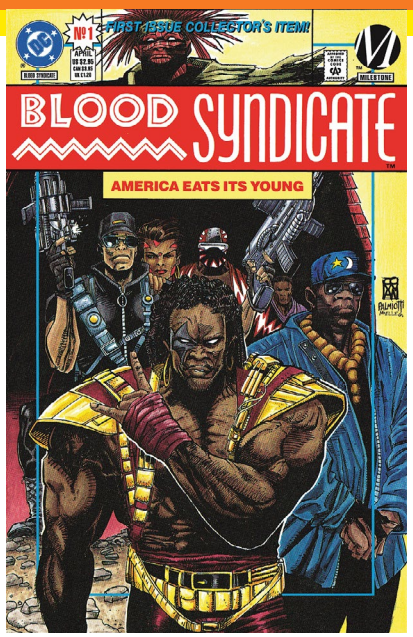
"If you were a person who struggles with who you are as opposed to what body you were forced into by birth, and suddenly you got this ability to literally be anything you wanted to be, it might have been quite transformative in lots of ways in addition to having a huge weight lifted off you. And, if anything, Masquerade – who will appear in this opening arc – will be the most changed from their original depiction. In some ways, Masquerade was a betrayer character in the original *Blood Syndicate*, but in *Season One*, they're going to be the closest we get to a straight-up superhero!"

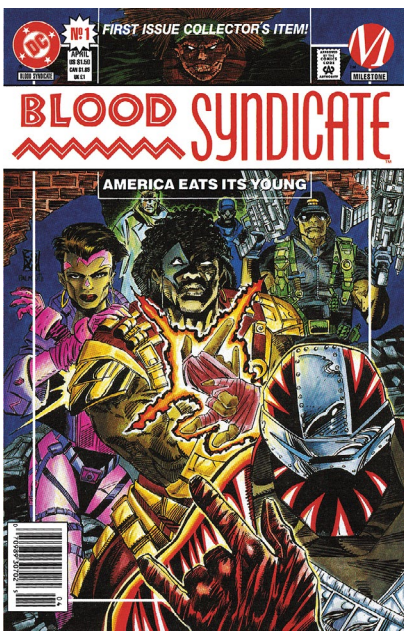
"I want to show the progression of a person from one mindset to another, so Wise has to start off in a bad place"

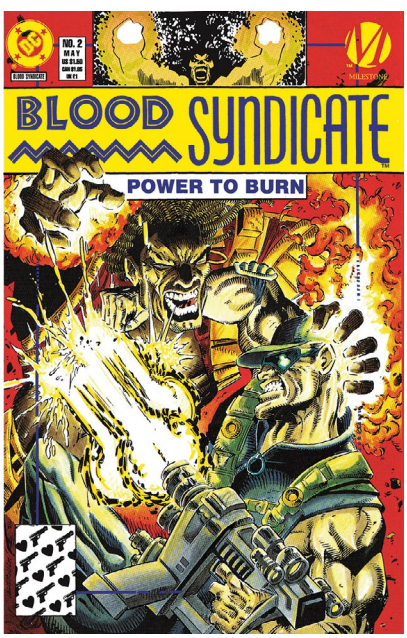
Milestone was also home to lesbian partners Donner and Blitzen, members of the secretive Shadow Cabinet. "The Shadow Cabinet was a whole other thing, and if I'm allowed to run long enough I will get to them," promises Thorne. "I love Donner and Blitzen because, again, they were written as, 'Hey, we're here, we're queer, we're doing our thing.' It was: here's a couple, and they're superheroes, and they're basically a married couple of superheroes, and they played that way. They joked and mocked each other and worked very well in tandem, even though their powers didn't really align." ●



Blood Syndicate: Season One issue three is out on 15 July.









LOVING THE ALIEN

Trans superhero *Galaxy: The Prettiest Star* is out of this world

The tale of Taylor Barzelay – an extraterrestrial exile who takes on the guise of a human boy – *Galaxy: The Prettiest Star* introduces a new transgender hero to the DC Universe. But while the Young Adult graphic novel plays with the tropes of the genre, Taylor's transformation shouldn't be taken merely as allegory.

"It's mainly a metaphor for being different, because the one thing I wanted to emphasis is that Galaxy is trans and queer, full stop," explains writer Jadzia Axelrod.

"We also have the added metaphor of her being a sparkly-faced space princess inside while having to be in the body of a human boy. But also, she's queer and trans explicitly, so she's queer and trans as a metaphor and she's queer and trans in actuality."

Axelrod hopes that the 208-pager can be enjoyed not just by queer and trans people but by a much wider audience. "I absolutely want people who are straight and cis to read *Galaxy* as a story and see themselves in it," she continues. "But I also wanted her to be unambiguously queer and trans, because as a queer and trans person I've grown up having to see myself in metaphor over and over again. So with this I wanted to flip it and have the straight cis people see themselves in metaphor and read this book about someone who is not like themselves, but they can still see themselves and get that emotion."

As the Galaxy Crowned, an orphaned princess from the planet Cyandii and one of the few survivors of a deadly interstellar war, Taylor's origin echoes the Last Son of Krypton's classic beginnings, and Axelrod had fun playing with various superheroic conventions.

"She's living in this small community having come from outer space, her parents are dead, and she feels lost without them much in the same way as Superman and Batman did at that age," she explains. "This book is an amalgam of many different references and points of view, but done in a very intentional and specific way in order to tell a different type of story."

Indeed, although he never actually appears, the Man of Steel still casts a sizeable shadow. "To have Superman in there as a long presence was very exciting," admits Axelrod. "He does have a long presence in part because who doesn't love Superman? But also, he symbolises the kind of archetypal hero we keep seeing: the straight, cis white male hero, who is like this everyman.

"So it was really important to show how this is wholly inadequate, but without actually ragging on Superman, because I love Superman! This is a different story, which is for all the people who look at Superman and don't see themselves."

While her girlfriend Kat Silverberg hails from Metropolis, Galaxy actually lives in the small town of Ozma Gap. "I grew up in a rural community, although I live in a city now, so I know what it's like to be a teenager in a small town," says Axelrod. "The story benefits from being set in an isolated pocket of the DC Universe, which is separate from everything else. But I would love to see Galaxy interact with established superheroes."

Galaxy: The Prettiest Star is out now.

BREAKING OUT

SHOWRUNNER CAROLINE DRIES REFLECTS ON HOW *BATWOMAN* CHANGED BOTH HER AND THE SUPERHERO LANDSCAPE

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

FOR THREE SEASONS, GOTHAM City was a much better place because of its protector, Batwoman. The CW series translated the comic book character into a live-action renegade with Kate Kane (Ruby Rose), the first lesbian superhero leading a series, and then with Ryan Wilder (Javicia Leslie), the first queer black superhero leading a series.

The authenticity of the show's LGBTQ+ perspective carried through from the creative mind behind the series, showrunner Caroline Dries. As a lesbian writer in Hollywood, *Batwoman* afforded Dries the opportunity to imbue her own experiences into the stories of both iterations of the superhero. Over the course of 51 episodes, *Batwoman* broke new ground with inclusive and diverse storytelling in the superhero sphere, as well as making the character much more present in the overall pop culture conversation.

On a personal level, Dries tells *SFX* that getting to steer *Batwoman* for three years opened her eyes to the power of what representation means to audiences watching something they've never been able to see before on television. She says attending a San Diego Comic-Con for the series and hearing directly from LGBTQ+ fans made her truly understand that "people believe in this character" and were getting to experience something altogether new.

"They're seeing themselves, but they're seeing themselves wearing a cape and being a hero and being awesome," Dries says of how the series expanded who can be superheroes. "That changed my outlook on what I could actually do with the show."



Javicia Leslie took over as Batwoman in season two.

Dries admits for the first season there was a tremendous personal learning curve that obscured the power of the show in her hands. "When I originally signed on to the show, for most of my life, I was still closeted," she shares. "I also had never run a show before, so I was really hyper-focused on doing a good job, hiring the right people, making sure the scripts were on time. This was what I would consider my big break as a showrunner and I just didn't want to mess it up. I was more focused on making sure the machine was running, and less focused on how what I'm about to write is actually going to impact people's lives."

But that changed after season one with the public response, and then when she had to recast the role and chose actress Javicia Leslie. A Black Batwoman changed the direction of the series, and Dries admits it was very intimidating to write an authentic story for a queer Black woman. "As somebody who signed on to the show to write for Kate Kane, who's a privileged white girl and I could write her coming out of my ears because it's me, who is



Meagan Tandy as Sophie Moore, with Bats.

Poison Ivy and Renee: will their story continue?

now representing the voice of a different point of view, it was really intimidating. But I'm glad we did it."

She continues, "I loved Kate so much, but there was this rebirth in my mind in what the potential of the show was, in that it could actually say something more than it was in season one. Now we could see another perspective, of somebody who doesn't come from a billion-dollar inheritance, and see what she can do with the suit. I think we handled that well, and most of it is due to Javicia being amazing."

Due to a major content refocus, *Batwoman* was among several The CW shows that were surprisingly cancelled. Dries says she was already making plans for season four, which would have addressed the aftermath of the Joker's blimp dropping an acid bomb on Gotham City. "I wanted there to be real ramifications for that," she says. "I wanted it to almost be post-apocalyptic, as Ryan is now one of the few left taking care of her city. I wanted her to really represent the hero of the city, as she's proven to herself that she's capable of being Batwoman. She has everything: a biological family and her Bat family. Now, how does she literally save her city from a Chernobyl situation?"

"As long as the Arrowverse is alive, then Ryan Wilder and Batwoman are alive"

She also had hopes to revive the Poison Ivy (Bridget Regan)/Renee Montoya (Victoria Cartagena) storyline, which she says fans loved. "We wrote that storyline so specific to lesbian drama," Dries smiles. "She and Renee were in this very dense, loving, toxic relationship. It was just really intense and relatable." And she wanted to give Ryan and Sophie (Meagan Tandy) their time in the sun too. "The way we handled her love story in season three, I really loved that," she enthuses. "I'm just grateful that we did it."

As to the future of the character, Dries says there's been no chatter about anything, even a rumoured movie. "I haven't been privy to any whispers of continuing in any way," she says. "A movie would be amazing, but I don't know about that. But I feel like her story is not over. I think as long as the Arrowverse is alive, then Ryan Wilder and Batwoman are alive. Time will tell."

What she does know is that three seasons of *Batwoman* now exist and will live on for fans to savour, and new audiences to discover. "If literally one person was able to be moved in a way that they found strength somehow from the show, all of these years of really struggling to keep the show going was worth it."

Batwoman is on The CW and All 4.



SCREAM QUEENS

BRYAN FULLER TALKS NEW DOCUMENTARY SERIES *QUEER FOR FEAR*

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

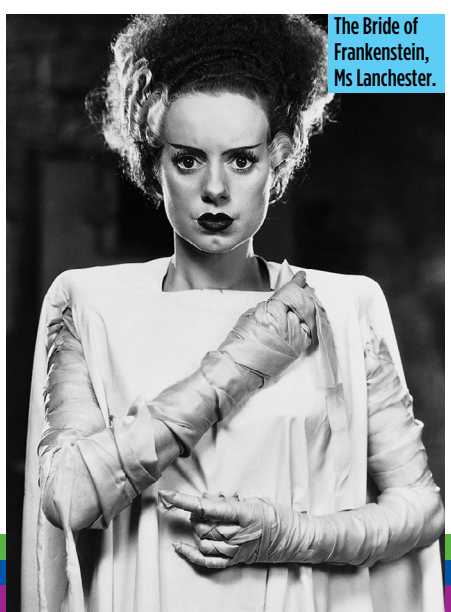
IF YOU PERUSE ANY LIST OF the most critically lauded, and fan beloved, sci-fi and horror television shows of the last 20 years, you'll find that Bryan Fuller's creations are well represented. After honing his TV scripting skills in the writers' rooms of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and *Star Trek: Voyager*, Fuller then forged his own path creating or developing series like *Dead Like Me* (2003), *Wonderfalls* (2004), *Pushing Daisies* (2007), *Hannibal* (2013), *American Gods* (2017) and *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017).

As a gay creative in Hollywood, he's always baked diversity and inclusion into the DNA of his storytelling, which gay and straight audiences have responded to with equal fervour. Fuller writes outsider characters and their complex relationships – from the untouchable lovers of Ned (Lee Pace) and Chuck (Anna Friel), to the homoerotic tension between Will Graham (Hugh Dancy) and Hannibal Lecter (Mads Mikkelsen) – as entirely relatable and understandable, regardless of how an audience member labels their own sexual identity.

But it's as an aficionado of horror that Fuller finds his own happy place, not only because of the thrills and chills, but because of the subtext that he's always found speaking to him throughout the genre. "I have always seen a queer narrative in horror stories from the various early experiences that I had with horror," Fuller tells *SFX*.

"My earliest experiences with horror were *The Munsters* and the [General Mills] monster cereals," he says, referring to '70s and '80s products like Count Chocula and Frankenberry. "They're all sort of queer and childlike in terms of looking at these stories innocently, but seeing so much more going on when you start to apply queer thematics to the dynamics."

On this particular day in late May, Fuller is fresh out of the edit bay on his latest project, the Shudder docuseries *Queer For Fear*. Set to air in late summer, the four-part series is Fuller's first foray into unscripted storytelling.



The Bride of Frankenstein, Ms Lanchester.

RICH FURY/INVISION/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK, ALAMY

As an executive producer, interviewer/interviewee and co-shaper of the overall narrative, Fuller says this project is an opportunity to educate, surprise and set context for the queer artists responsible for some of the greatest horror stories every told. "It's interesting the alchemy of the tone, which is part of what you're carving in the edit bay. It's a really fascinating aspect of documentary storytelling as opposed to scripted, traditional narratives that I'm used to."

Fuller emphasises that *Queer For Fear* is a collaboration between a broad range of LGBTQ+ contributors, from critics and writers to actors, historians and drag queens. And attempting to distil all of those disparate voices into focused stories has been an energetic discourse. "It's fascinating to see how conversation points break down amongst demographics of the queer," he shares. "The obvious ones are that queer women talk about Mary Shelley and queer men talk about James Whale. And then everybody talks about *The Bride Of Frankenstein*," he laughs.

He continues, "There's so much going into the process working with like-minded queers who all love horror, working together from different angles. We're all putting together an agenda and an outline for the conversations that we're going to have with interviewees. And then when the interviewees start engaging, it really opens our eyes to ways that →

the thematics are much further-reaching than what we initially anticipated."

Fuller likens the process to a pomegranate that keeps revealing a whole nest of seeds that you're salivating for. And their vast list of all-queer talking heads, including director Kimberly Peirce, entertainer Lea DeLari, podcaster Renée Bever, writer Mark Gatiss, actress Jasmin Savoy Brown and many others, also ended up recommending other voices whom Fuller says have enriched the series even more.

"I reached out to Jasmin Savoy Brown to talk to her about *Scream* and *Yellowjackets*, and she was like, 'This is great. Here's a whole bunch of other people you should also be talking to, like Carmen Maria Machado and Liv Hewson and Briana Venskus'. She hooked us up with a really cool crowd of queer women with fascinating perspectives on horror. That was one of the most exciting aspects of people in the queer community supporting this project. As a result, they have a sense of ownership of the stories we're trying to tell."

Crafting the series as four episodes, Fuller says it took them some time to whittle down

> **"So many people here love queer horror, yet everybody has a different idea about it"**

the hours and hours of interviews into focused themes that chart seminal horror works from Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley through to last year's *Yellowjackets*. "It's boggling and maddening how much ground there is to cover, and that's why it's taken so long," he says of their post-production process.

"When we did the first couple of sets of interviews, we didn't know about *Yellowjackets*. And then *Halloween* comes out with gay characters, and *Candyman* comes out with gay characters. And *Chucky* is full-bloom, prolapsed homosexuality on-screen for everybody to enjoy. All of these things were like, 'Holy shit! It's like the never-ending story of queer horror that benefits all of us as audience members'."

As to how they finally figured out a path for their storytelling, Fuller details: "The first episode sets the table for a history through the artists. And then we shift into historical and theoretical, and what was happening in the world to inform these things. There are those things that are earmarking bigger movements in society that the story gets framed around in a really interesting way.

"The episodes will have a slightly different flavour as they go on, because they all have different supervisors, directors and story editors that are constructing them as if they were their own individual episodes. And then we go back and forth, and communicate with each other and give each other notes. It's really, really fascinating because so many people here love queer horror, yet everybody has a different idea about it. A lot of people have the same ideas, but everybody has a slightly different idea, and that's fantastic."

Having started the interviews for *Queer For Fear* in 2021, Fuller says that a year later, "My queer horror knowledge has quadrupled by participating in this doc, because there's so many things that I had no idea about. I didn't know that there was this whole queer experience of Bram Stoker going into writing



Chucky and his friend Jake: they're here, they're queer.



The new *Candyman* featured gay characters.



Michael Myers isn't bothered if you're gay or straight.



Jasmin Savoy Brown (left) as Taissa in *Yellowjackets*.

Dracula and his path crossing with Oscar Wilde. And then Oscar Wilde's imprisonment for being queer, dropping that bomb in London social circles – which certainly affected Bram Stoker, because he married Oscar Wilde's beard. There's aspects of it that continue to unveil the adventures of being a queer artist who loves horror.

"I think where we are most successful in the documentary is when we zero in on a personality, whether it's FW Murnau, James Whale, Daphne du Maurier, Patricia Highsmith or Arthur Lorenz – all the people that we feature as queer artists and storytellers."

With such a broad range of queer artists featured, Fuller says it has actually made the doc even more accessible for those who don't identify as LGBTQ+. "It starts to allow the audience to project a certain amount of their own experience onto what these artists went through just to express themselves as queer people," he explains.

"And that's where it is so relatable to an ideological queerness of people who identify as straight, but look at the world through a queer lens. We also are telling the story to them because I'm sure in their narratives, they have felt a bit like Frankenstein's monster. There's something about illustrating and discussing the universality of queerness, and how even a straight-identifying person can relate to the content through a queer lens, because I'm sure they've felt queer in some circumstances."

Shifting outside the doc to discuss his ground's eye view of how LGBTQ+ storytelling across the industry is faring these days, in terms of queer creators getting to tell their stories, Fuller muses: "Well, I think we're definitely in an upswing on an undulating graphic. But I think we can't afford to be terribly complacent. As we're witnessing, queer issues politicised to divide human interests is as 'in vogue' as it has ever been.

"So, I think creatively, yes, we have a lot more people who are interested, and pushing the conversation forward. But we have a lot of people who aren't, and are oppositional," he adds. "But I feel like right now, there is as much support as we've had in certain periods, at least in my consciousness of being queer, but it is so slippery. And homophobia is around every corner."

A BRIDGE TOO FAR

Asked if the normalising of queer people into mainstream storytelling is the best path to making inclusion more accepted, Fuller takes a beat and says, "It's interesting, as a gay man who doesn't believe in marriage, but will fight for your right to marry if that's what you want to do... There's certain conventions of heteronormativity that just hold zero interest for me.

"I think a lot of the kind of queer storytelling that we're seeing is about a certain homogenisation between queer cultures and straight cultures. And while that is interesting and helpful, and is building a bridge for bigger conversations, personally I don't find it terribly interesting. I like being the monster on the edge of town. But I love what it's doing to sort of erode barriers for the public in general."

He says that a great example of a queer storyteller truly making strides right now is *Chucky* creator Don Mancini, who has taken the character into streaming TV. Citing what Mancini was trying to do with *Seed Of Chucky* (2004) as too fringe for that time, Fuller now says it's "so wildly representative" of many aspects of queer identity.

"I think we all really need to shower Don Mancini with the praise that he deserves for following an artistic journey when it was perhaps not fiscally wise to do so, but he did it anyway. He didn't let the box office disappointment of his first transgressive move into clearly identifying Chucky as a queer franchise [stop him], and now he's doubling down on that with the television series.

"He's doing more in queer horror that is beautiful and positive and fucked up, and delinquent and delirious."

Queer For Fear will premiere on Shudder in the late summer.

ALAMY

HOLDING OUT FOR A HERO

LEGACIES ADDED A LITTLE HEAT WITH THE ARRIVAL OF ZANE PHILLIPS AS PROMETHEUS

WORDS: **BRYAN CAIRNS** /// PHOTOGRAPHY: **BEN ABARBANEL**

Legacies (the *Vampire Diaries* spin-off show) introduced a queer love story of godly proportions in its fourth and final season. After taking up residence at the Salvatore Boarding School for the Young and Gifted, Ben (Zane Phillips) – aka the 5,000-year-old demigod Prometheus – began to crush on the alpha werewolf, Jed (Ben Levin).

The two kindred spirits shared a mutual attraction and bonded over daddy issues. Eventually, they shared a steamy kiss and became a ship-worthy couple... complete with crazy chemistry and their own set of complications. Phillips, who easily embodies the smouldering attributes and emotional depth of a tormented deity, took time out from the set of the supernatural drama to speak about physical appearances, that smooch, queer representation and fantasy roles.

The character breakdown for the role of Ben went something like "Physically perfect. Built like a hero." What does it take to keep in godly shape?

It's psychotic. Everybody has a perfect body the way they are. For me, it's about playing the game. I know what is expected in terms of roles like this. I'm a gay man and I see images of extremely fit people on a daily basis. That's the life that we live. In this case, it did fit to be physically imposing, to look physically powerful. I work out because it helps me feel sane. I eat well because it makes me feel better. But I tell you, once this season wraps, I am going to be eating so much pizza.

Ben and Jed come from different worlds. What have you enjoyed about how the writers have handled this relationship?

I really appreciated how two characters with vastly different life experiences – you have a demigod who has been eaten by a mud monster and tortured for 5,000 years and you have this werewolf, who is most likely a self-made orphan getting over his own troubles with toxic traits – have found common ground between us. I like that every step of our relationship can be seen through how we connect with one another's life.

What do you recall about the first queer relationship you ever saw on television?

Probably, clandestinely watching YouTube videos of *Queer As Folk* [Russell T Davies's drama for Channel 4]. That would have been around 2008. I remember YouTube being an absolute gateway into, "Oh, there's an entire show about this?" Even for now, it's a little racy. That was the first time I had been exposed to media that was that bold. Either that, or maybe I vaguely watched *Buffy* with Tara and Willow.

Ben and Jed shared a kiss. What was going through your mind when you read that in the script?

First of all, I was so ready for it. Since I got here, I was like, "When do I get my kisses?" I remember hearing it was coming up in the episode. I remember thinking it was an incredibly beautiful scene, and quiet. I knew we were going to be able to take our time. I thought it was incredibly effective. On my end, Ben's job in that scene is to listen and to validate Jed's experience.

If you were a gay god in real life, what would you use your powers for?

I would really like to be able to go places really quick. Transportation is a pain and I'd like to be able to skip it entirely.

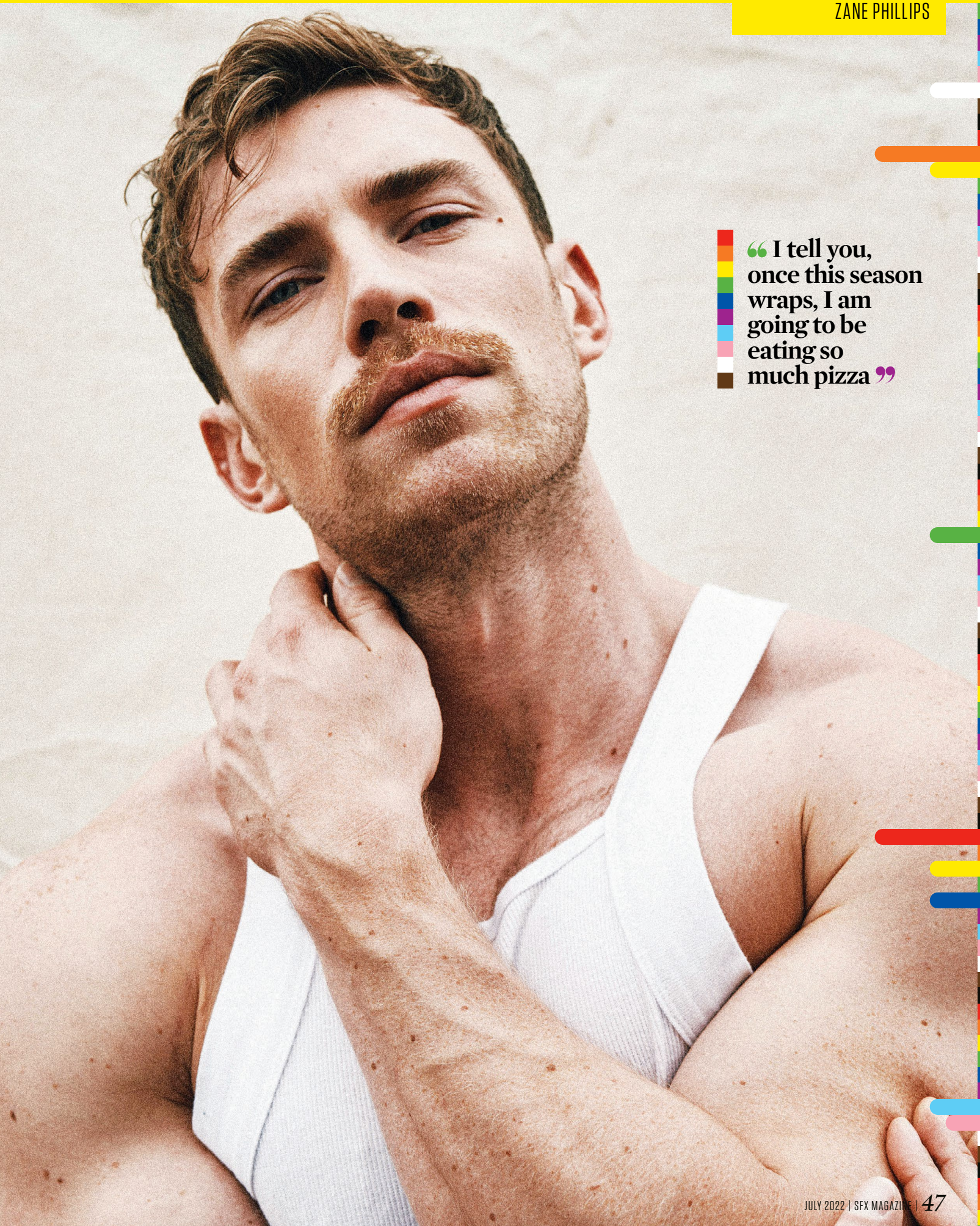
What are some of your dream roles? What do you aspire towards in this industry?

I am a fantasy nerd. I have started to get really into it. I need to be on that *Lord Of The Rings* show. I want nothing more than to be able to be in that world. I'd love to slip into that *Wheel Of Time* series. I'd love to be a nice little gay Asmodean. I'd love to do *Song Of Achilles*. Madeline Miller, call me, please!

Representation is a word that gets thrown around a lot. What has this *Legacies* role meant to you?

What is cool about this character, especially with him being queer in some way – I won't put a label on it, because he's 5,000 years old – is for a character to be queer and have a full backstory. It allows audiences to jump in and care about this person. He's more than just a plot device. He has connections to the villain. He has different motives. He has alternative methods for accomplishing his goals than maybe others would like. To me, that is what is meaningful. I'm not going to say I don't add queer flavour to the character. He's not socialised in a modern queer society. At the same time, it's in my physicality. It's in the way that I look at Ben. I do get to add my own lived-in experience to this character. I'm happy and so grateful.

Legacies is on The CW. A UK release is TBC.



> “I tell you, once this season wraps, I am going to be eating so much pizza”

WHERE NO-ONE HAS GONE BEFORE



Blu del Barrio as Adira Tal, new to season three.



Anthony Rapp as Stamets, introduced in season one.





STAR TREK: DISCOVERY SHOWRUNNER MICHELLE PARADISE IS CHARTING BOLD NEW DIVERSITY FOR THE FRANCHISE

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

MICHELLE PARADISE'S two seasons as the executive producer and showrunner of *Star Trek: Discovery* has seen her become an integral member of the new guard of *Trek* writers who are expanding the narratives to be explicitly more inclusive of LGBTQ+ stories and characters. *Discovery* was created by queer writer Bryan Fuller and Alex Kurtzman, and in the debut season, they introduced the first openly gay characters and couple in episodic *Trek*'s history, in the guise of Engineer Paul Stamets (Anthony Rapp) and Doctor Hugh Culber (Wilson Cruz).

As a lesbian and long-time *Trek* fan, Paradise tells *SFX* that her position as showrunner is an incredible place to be for a queer writer. "It's an honour to continue getting to put [in] different faces and experiences, and championing diversity of all kinds," she says. "All of those things are reflecting the world, not just as it currently is, but as we want it to be. And that's also the wonderful thing about sci-fi, is that you can reflect it as you want it to be."

In the third season of *Discovery*, Paradise added two new characters to the cast with Adira Tal (Blu del Barrio) and Gray Tal (Ian Alexander) who are non-binary and transgender characters and actors, respectively. There have never been characters of their orientations in the *Trek* franchise before.

"We're always looking, every season, for what new characters we can bring into the show," Paradise explains about overall cast expansion. When they realised that their show had no non-binary or trans characters, or actors who identify as either, they knew it was time to remedy that.

"When you look in that direction for a character, it's important to have an actor who also represents that, to whatever degree," Paradise adds. "When we were adding Blu to the show, we also brought in Ian as well, because in season three we wrote a whole story about Adira and Gray. When we were introducing those two characters, we also partnered with Nick Adams at GLAAD, who handles gender representation. Before we ever even wrote a word, when we were just conceiving of those characters, it was an ongoing discussion with lots of input also from Nick. It's hugely, hugely important that if it's not our lived experience, we don't presume to know what that experience is."

> **"Diversity was baked into what Gene Roddenberry did back on the original series"**

As their stories have become more complicated and woven into the lives of Stamets and Culber, Paradise says the show keeps an open dialogue with the cast members about keeping their characters' experiences as authentic as possible. "Any episode that's about the two of them, or that's dealing with anything in that zip code, we've solicited their feedback,"



Dr Hugh Culber (Wilson Cruz), another gay character.



Gray is introduced to their synthetic body.



Ian Alexander as Gray Tal, partner of Adira.

she explains. "And Nick has read all of those scripts. He always has tremendous feedback for us. Like he was instrumental last season in episodes one through three when we're dealing with the synthetic body for Gray, which we were very aware that that is a metaphor made manifest. For those sorts of things, we want to make sure that we're handling it carefully and we got input on all of that."

Paradise continues, "And with Blu – who has said this publicly, so I'm not speaking out of turn – when they were first cast they were not yet out as being non-binary, so the first few episodes referred to Adira as she. There was a lot of conversation with Blu as to when that would happen and how that would happen. I pitched a version of the Adira/Stamets scene to them long before it was written, to get their input on: 'Does this feel real? Is there anything that doesn't feel right?'"

While some may see the inclusion of these stories as "changing" *Trek*, Paradise says these diverse stories are in alignment with creator Gene Roddenberry's ethos for expansive metaphorical storytelling. "Diversity was baked into what he did back on the original series. And diversity has been a huge component of all the iterations since then," she emphasises. "That is just baked into the DNA of the show.

"I'm sure there are some folks who would want less diversity, but that's not something that's ever in our realm of thinking," she adds. "We feel like diversity is a really, really good thing. It's a very powerful thing for someone to be able to see themselves on screen, or to see a representation of themselves on screen. That is the kind of thing that many, many viewers never got to see growing up, and it's something that right now feels hugely important. We recognise very much the value of that, and the importance of that. I don't think that can be overstated, really."

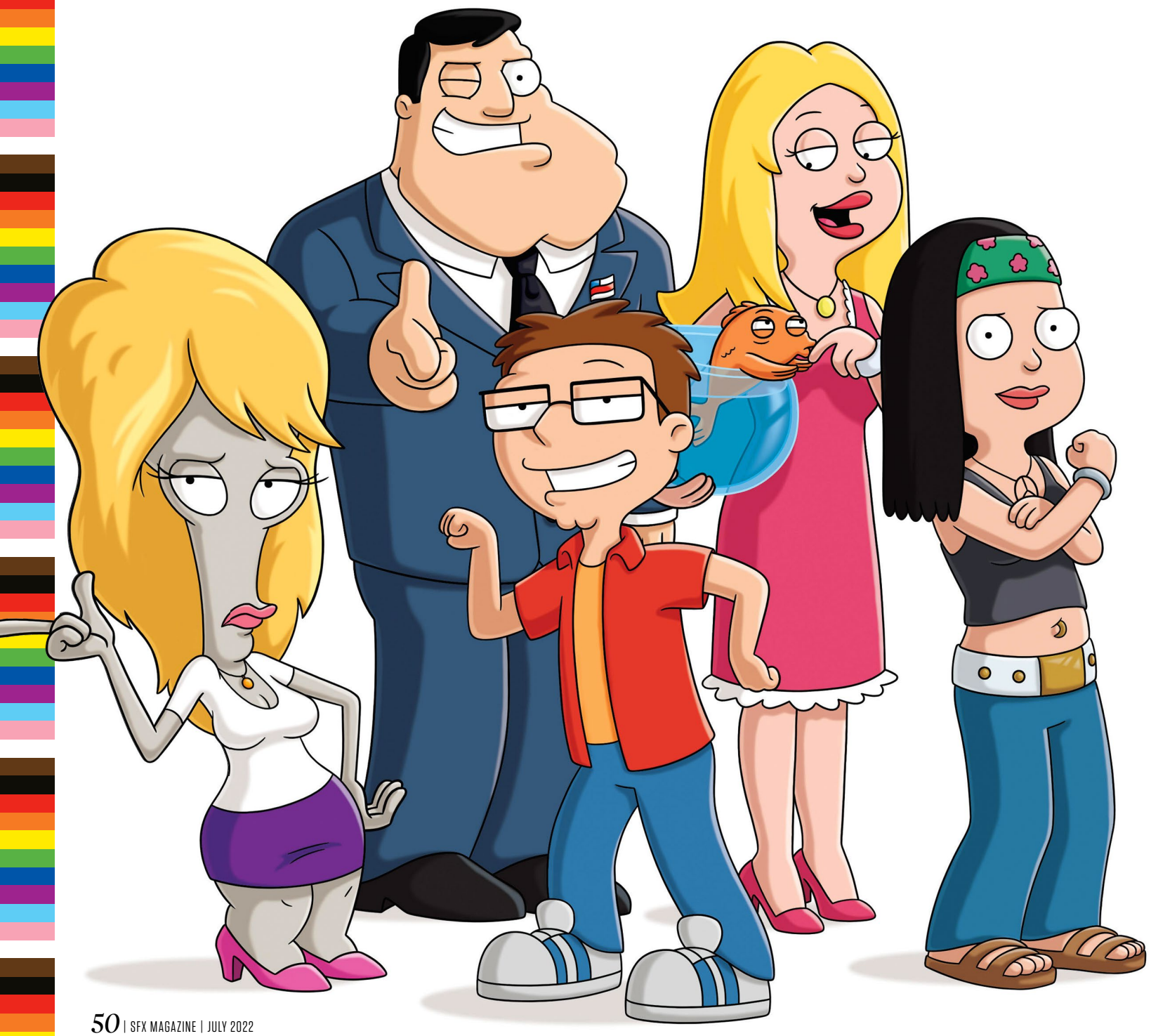
She adds that the feedback the cast gets from viewers at cons and *Trek* events reiterates the impact. "I hear some of their stories there and it's deeply moving what all of this means to the audience. It's a special thing, and a privilege to get to be part of that."

Star Trek: Discovery is on Paramount+ in the UK from 22 June.

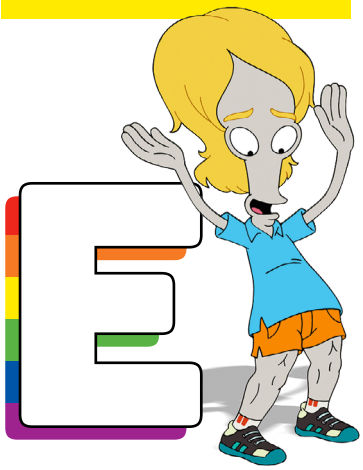
GREY

THE ALIAS-SWITCHING EXTRATERRESTRIAL PANSEXUAL GIVES A RARE PRESS INTERVIEW

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**



PRIDE



Roger the Alien, the sometimes reluctant additional housemate of the Smiths in *American Dad!*, is hard to pin down for conversations with sci-fi mags. Aside from the fact that the FBI have an entire floor dedicated to recapturing him since he escaped from Area 51 (which, *Galactica 1980* disclaimer, *totally* doesn't exist, okay?), he has so many personas that even he can't quite keep up – and some of them seem to have their own lives outside of Roger himself.

We do know that he likes wine, he's over 1,601 years old, is a fan of Bananarama and isn't shy of donning a frock *(Is this not our editor? – Ian)*. He was in a same-sex relationship with another member of his species, Zing – but he won't talk about that. He's also got a son, Rogu, who formed from Roger's tumour. Awwww. But what does he think of our Earth-bound Pride customs and depictions of science fiction?

SFX tracked him down to Langley Falls, Virginia – sorry FBI, we can't disclose exactly where – to find out what the grey-skinned sociopath has currently got on his mind.

What do you love and hate about this planet?
Hate vegetables. Love Bobby Cannavale.

Who's your sci-fi crush and why?
Bill Gates. I've been to the future, so... just trust me. He gets hotter.

You're known for your various characters, some of which are queer-coded. Other than your own, who do you think are the best queer-coded characters in sci-fi, fantasy or horror?
Tough one, but gotta go with Groot. I think I saw a "queer code" carved into his bark that said, "I have big strong tree-branch-like genitals."

Which genre franchise would you most like to be in and why?
Spider-Man. Although I'd sling my webs a liiiittle differently.

How would you describe what a pansexual is, for anyone who doesn't know?
Hard to describe. It's a lot like the first time you see Groot. Just an uncontrollable attraction to a fictional tree-like organism-man and a compulsive desire to think and talk about making love to him.

What is it like to be a pansexual icon?
Oh my god, I can't even tell you how much tail it gets me. I wish I could tell you, but I've signed a number of NDAs and it would mean my ass. I need my ass. I believe it plays an integral role in my being a pansexual icon.

What are the attitudes to sexuality on your planet and how do they differ from Earth?
Attitudes to sexuality... I guess I'd have to go with horny. Or is horny an emotion?

> **"I haven't told anyone this, but I think I'm sexually attracted to Groot"**

What do you look for in a partner?
Their genitals.

What advice would you give to your son Rogu if he grew up to be queer?
I'd tell him to live his truth every day without fear and shame and that a little bit of lube can solve anything.

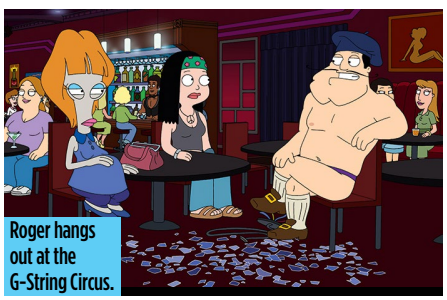
What's your favourite tipple and memory associated with it?
It's definitely tequila, because one time, I had too much at a bar and my date said he was going to "drain the lizard" and I thought he meant something else, which also leads to my favourite jail memory... So, tequila.

Which of your personas is your favourite and why?
Oh wow, that's like asking a human which of their children is their favourite. And the answer's the same: the newest one.

Who would you be marching as at Pride this year, and what would your song of choice be?
Clip Clop. "Old Town Road". It's the obvious choice. Plus, he already has a cowboy hat from Gucci.

Your species needs to let your bitchiness out or it turns to poison. Is there anything in particular you'd like to get off your chest today?
I haven't told anyone this... but I think I'm sexually attracted to Groot. I know that wasn't bitchy, but I'll get bitchy if our agents don't at least get us to sit down for drinks.

American Dad! is on Star on Disney+.


Roger hangs out at the G-String Circus.


Roger's a loving dad to his tumour.



As Gina Lavetti in "I Am the Jeans".

© FOX, ALAMY

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

JUNO DAWSON

The YA author tells us about her girl-powered new novel for adults

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Elvind Hansen

BECAUSE OF THE 30-YEAR RULE, THE 1990S are back. For the uninitiated, this is the idea that even the most ephemeral pop culture of three decades ago can be brought back into the light by those who grew up with it. Just ask Juno Dawson.

"I've tried to explain the Spice Girls to people who were not 13 in 1996," she says, "and it's always kind of fallen on deaf ears, but I can't really downplay the impact they had on me at the time, what they made me realise about myself in terms of my own queerness. At the time, I thought I wanted to be a Spice Girl. But obviously you can just be a girl, you don't have to be a Spice Girl."

More generally, the question of who we become when we grow up lies at the centre of Dawson's new book, *Her Majesty's Royal Coven*, the first volume in a fantasy trilogy that follows the fortunes of a group of childhood friends – witches and, yes, Spice Girls fans – from Hebden Bridge as they enter early middle age.

Dawson has enjoyed huge success as a YA writer, but this is her first novel aimed squarely at adults. It grew, she says, from the jet-lagged notion of "*Desperate Housewives* with witches" which hit her while she was out-of-kilter wakeful on a book tour in Australia. The namecheck to Wisteria Lane is, in its way, as revealing as any '90s references.

"I think a lot of what my life is like now would make for really shit YA fiction," she says. "You know, no 17-year-old is interested in the Sussex property market. No 17-year-old is interested in choosing Farrow & Ball paint. It's so dull, but there was this real need in me to talk about my weird anxieties about my now very adult life, which wouldn't have been appropriate for teen fiction."

GEEK LOVE

That may make *Her Majesty's Royal Coven* sound like literary fiction, but this is character-driven popular fiction, with plot and pace to spare. Dawson even kept "a little chart" so she could keep track of when "the last big witchy moment" took place: More than two chapters without such a moment and she knew something had "gone wrong".

But it also has serious things to say. One of the key characters is, like Dawson, transgender, and the novel deals in part with how another character refuses to accept the idea of a young trans witch joining a coven. "It was quite a dark way to spend lockdown, role-playing someone who really doesn't like me very much at all," says Dawson, who says she came away from the experience convinced "fear or prejudice towards trans women" is just fear and prejudice.

BIODATA

From
Bingley, West Yorkshire

Greatest Hits
Dawson's best-selling YA books include *Hollow Pike* and *Say Her Name*. *Meat Market* won the YA Book Prize for 2020. She's written non-fiction too, including *This Book Is Gay*, a "manual to all areas of life as an LGBT person".

Random Fact
Dawson would also have written for *Who* spin-off *Class* if it had gone to a second series. Her episode would have centred on Tanya, and "had a *Ferris Bueller* vibe".



"You know that conversation you read about in the newspapers?" she says. "It's not about trans people. It's about people's idea of trans people. Actually, trans people are people who are just going about their lives today. So far, I've walked my dog and had a coffee. Wild scenes."

Dawson says she "felt very lost until I started my transition", a process that "answered the biggest question of my life". Married in 2020, she has a settled but busy life, but it wasn't always thus. Growing up in Bingley, she was a "massive nerd" and lonely, someone who found "sanctuary in science fiction and fantasy", especially *Doctor Who* and 6.00pm re-runs of *Buffy* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* on BBC Two. It wasn't until she studied for her A-Levels that she formed a friendship group with fellow queer kids.

The scene was set for her to blossom by attending university amid the bright lights of Brighton, London or Manchester. Instead, she studied at Bangor in North Wales. Just as well, she jokes. "I'm a summer baby. I would have died, because I wouldn't have known how to handle everything the queer scene can offer."

SPICE UP YOUR LIFE

After university, she became a primary school teacher, but she wanted to write. Except how did you go about becoming a writer? In part because of her background, she had no idea. To return to the Spice Girls again, it was important to Dawson the, ahem, wannabe author that "they were five working class women – even the posh one wasn't that posh, let's be honest – who through tenacity and sheer willpower became the five most famous women in the world". Then she discovered "these magical people called agents, and they constantly need material, because if they don't get material, they're not going to make any money".

She was lucky that her first book *Hollow Pike* "just caught the tail end of the supernatural Young Adult wave" created by the likes of Stephenie Meyer. A year later, she says, and the book "would not have sold, because all anybody wanted was gritty dystopias". Dawson was on her way.

Fast forward a decade and she's lately returned to one of her first loves, *Doctor Who* – initially with the novel *The Good Doctor* and now with *Doctor Who: Redacted*, a podcast that imagines the Doctor being expunged from reality. Fans like it. "People have been so nice, and I'm sure because I've been looking," she laughs. "I have skulked the forums..."

Her Majesty's Royal Coven is published by Harper Voyager on 21 July.



> “I’ve tried to explain the Spice Girls to people who were not 13 in 1996”



THE TREKKING CREW

SET PHASERS TO RETRO! MEET THE ENTERPRISING CAST CHARTING THE FINAL FRONTIER IN

STAR TREK: STRANGE NEW WORLDS

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**



STARFLEET PERSONNEL FILE

ANSON MOUNT

CHRISTOPHER PIKE

NCC-1701/1 COMMAND



Pike not only has a backstory but a forwardstory, too. How big a challenge is that to play?

It's not common, is it? Usually you're expected to do acts one through three, and here we have a situation where we know act one and we know act three, and we need to figure out act two. In playwriting, act two is where your problems are. I chose not to feel too much pressure because I'm a firm believer that a different era of a person is a different person. So we got to see Jeffrey Hunter's early Pike, a very young, rather self-involved character in the midst of an identity crisis. I wanted to bring in a little more seasoned Pike, both as a professional and as someone who has a better sense of themselves.

What does that iconic uniform give you as an actor?

It gives me motivation to go to the gym! Those uniforms don't hide anything. Eat a candy bar and suddenly there's a candy bar shape on your stomach!

You get to meet Jim Kirk in season two. How do you think that's going to shake up your character?

Pike himself is not even aware of the significance of Kirk, right? He's going to be discovering this character in real time, hopefully at the same time that we're discovering what a young Kirk was like.

Are you tempted to follow William Shatner into space for real?

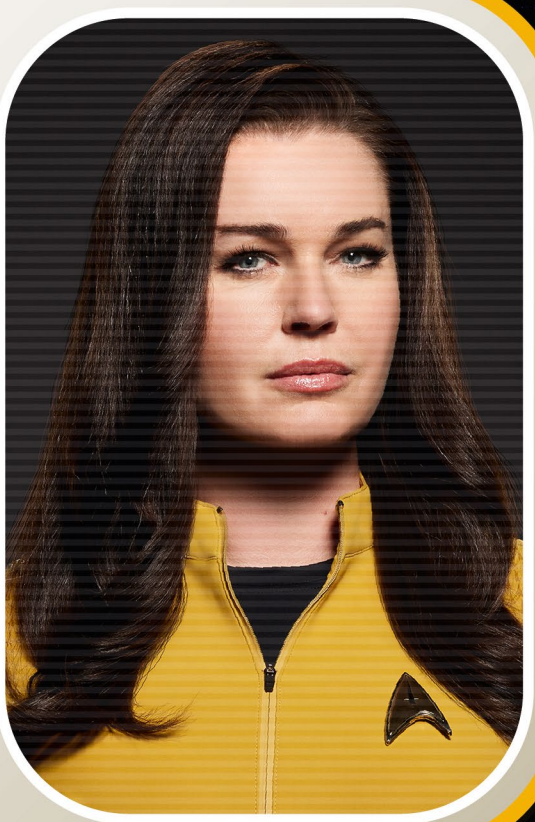
There was a time when I would have taken that ticket in a heartbeat but I am a new father and I don't believe in taking unnecessary risks with my life right now! There are things I know I will never do and I am content with that. I am aware I will never ride a bull, I will never climb Mount Everest and I'll probably never go to space. I mean, once the kids get shipped off to college, maybe we'll readdress that. But by then maybe it'll just be a very passé thing...

STARFLEET PERSONNEL FILE

REBECCA ROMIJN

UNA CHIN-RILEY

NCC-1701/2 COMMAND



How would you describe the dynamic between Number One and Pike?

It's funny – a lot of us don't have full backstories for our characters, so as actors we sort of decide for ourselves. We have to take certain liberties when we're working things out within scenes. So we've decided that there was probably something that happened between us, but a very long time ago, and we're kind of like exes who know how to read each other a million miles away. We can see straight through each other. That's what we're going with, for now – until they give us more information! We do know that we've known each other for a very long time. We were probably at Starfleet Academy together, when we were 18 years old.

You've been a *Star Trek* fan since the age of eight...

My mom introduced me to it, and I've now discovered that a lot of people's moms introduced them to *Star Trek*. And I don't think that's by accident. I have a theory, as a mom, that a mother looks into their child's eyes and sees nothing but curiosity and the need for exploration. You want your child to think big, to think outside the box, to think universally. And my mom and I would have conversations about whether or not we're the only ones in this universe, whether or not there's life on other planets. It would spark conversations about acceptance, exploration, curiosity. These are all things that mothers want to foster in their children. So I don't think it's an accident that mothers introduce their children to *Star Trek*.

Are you excited by Jim Kirk joining in season two?

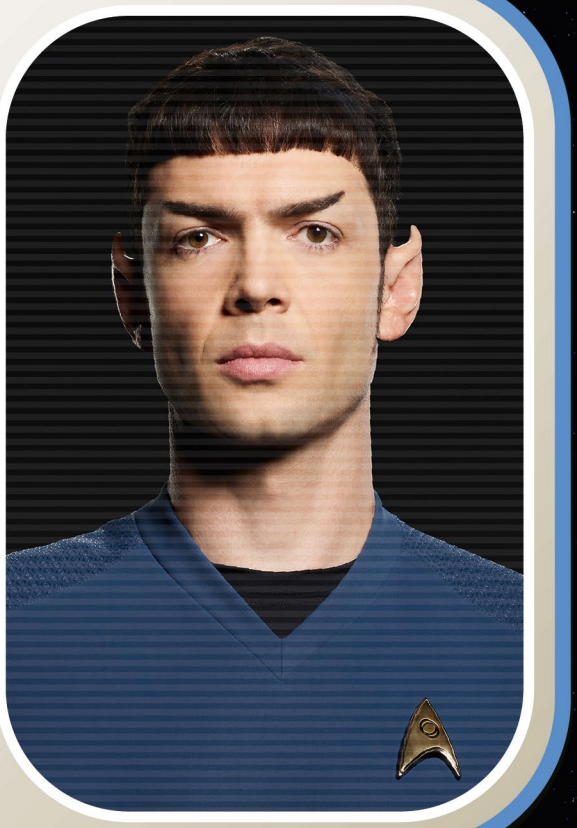
It's very exciting. We're actually shooting an episode right now and the very last thing that happens in that episode... I mean certain things happen and you just read it on the page and you burst into tears. That involves Jim Kirk...

STARFLEET PERSONNEL FILE

ETHAN PECK

SPOCK

NCC-1701/3 SCIENCES



How hard is it to hold on to *Star Trek*'s original idealism, given the state of the real world?

We, as the characters, are on a spaceship, isolated in this city in space. And we film in Toronto on these stages, and in our own way we are also isolated. It's like we are in a spaceship. We do look at the news and we sometimes discuss it at work, but for the most part we all believe in what we are creating, and what we are creating is a vision for the future that's inclusive and hopeful and curious, and I think that's so wonderfully antidotal to what's happening in the world right now. So it's difficult and also it's so easy to do what we do because we all believe in it so deeply.

Leonard Nimoy said a line reading of the word "fascinating" gave him the key to playing Spock. Have you had a similar experience?

When I hear the word "captain" in my head, that's kind of like my touchstone for his voice. There are also some ways that he says words like sens*ors* – *ors* ending words – that I really try to adhere to in my performance.

A young Jim Kirk is joining in season two. Are you looking forward to building on that classic relationship between Kirk and Spock?

It's hard to wrap my head around that. It's already so amazing to be part of this as Spock, so to bring him into the picture is its own kind of Bizarro World for me. But yeah, I'm thrilled, and trepidatious. I hope that they really handle it again with due diligence and great care. I'm sure that they will.

Spock's sideburns in this show are a work of art. Do you think there's a dandy side to Spock, despite the logic?

[Laughs] I would say no. I imagine it's akin to *The Jetsons*. He gets dragged out of bed and machines do all of his showering and doing-up.

STARFLEET PERSONNEL FILE

BABS OLUSANMOKUN

M'BENGA

NCC-1701/4 MEDICAL



What intrigued you about entering the world of *Star Trek*?

It is absolutely a responsibility and an honour, because Doctor M'Benga, played by Booker Bradshaw in the past, really appeared very little. I now bear the responsibility to carry what he did forward, and I try to bring something new and different and truthful to it. It's a chance to really craft something mostly from the ground up.

***Star Trek* was born out of '60s utopianism. Is it hard to hold on to that in today's world?**

The state of the world today, unfortunately, was also the state of the world in the '60s. Through the reading of history we know that it was most certainly not utopia for a lot of people around the world, on every continent. So I believe the vision of *Star Trek* by Gene Roddenberry was because he did not see what he wanted to see in the world. He did not see the best of the world on our screens back then, and that is why he came up with *Star Trek*. He thought, "I will build this future." I think that legacy is still being carried on. Doing this work reminds me that we all need to have hope, and hope is the beginning of the work we can all do together to move forward.

The sickbay set must be a great playground for an actor.

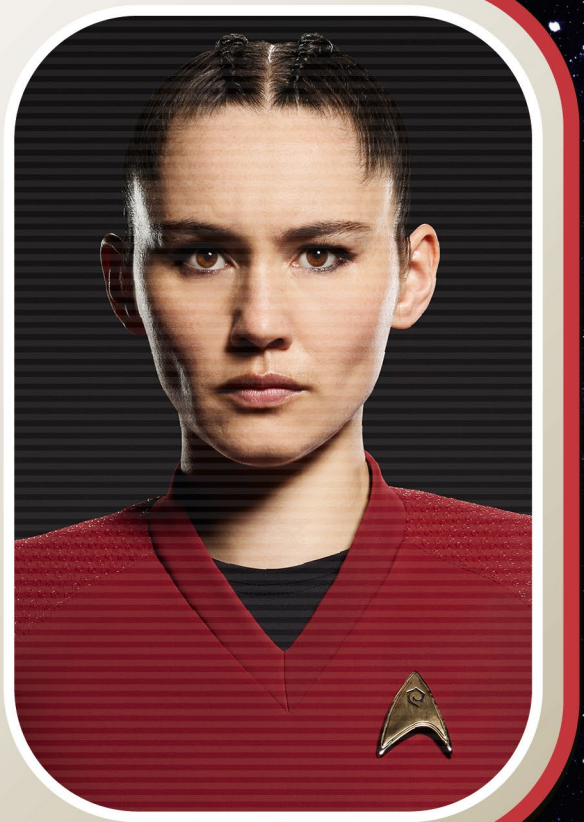
It's a reminder, really, that none of us are doing this alone. There's so much detail to it that you realise all the kinds of artists that are putting their time into this, like the person that worries about how the hypo-spray is built, or the pads... "No, Babs, you've got to do it like this!" They have this knowledge, and they're sharing it, and it's just really beautiful. It takes you back to being a child, when you just look at things in wonderment. As actors we're used to living in imaginary circumstances but certain ones, like this, remind you of why you do it.

STARFLEET PERSONNEL FILE

CHRISTINA CHONG

LA'AN NOONIEN-SINGH

NCC-1701/5 SECURITY



What intrigued you about La'an when you first read the scripts?

I accepted this job without knowing [who I was playing]. We weren't told at first what we were auditioning for, and I think I had maybe three scenes, seven pages in total, that I auditioned with. So there was very little information, really. I took this job and ended up in Toronto seven days later.

So for me I was super-excited to learn that she has such a big emotional journey and a character arc to go on. She goes from being this super-closed-off security chief who has all this past trauma in her life, and her journey throughout season one and further on is to overcome these dark monsters in her life, literally and also metaphorically. She's showing her vulnerability and it's really lovely to play that at the same time as covering it with this kind of Lieutenant energy.

So for me it was that emotional journey I was really excited about. And also the fact that I get to fight and do all the cool missions and wear the cool costumes and disguises!

The sets on this show are stunning. How did it feel stepping onto the bridge for the first time?

Surreal. It was surreal. It was like I'd been picked up by a crane from London, taken over the Atlantic and dropped onto the bridge. I was just like, "Uh, where am I, what am I doing, how did I get here?" The lights, everything... The first time we were on the bridge was a camera test, so we were testing what hairstyles we were going to do, and the costumes and make-up and all of that, and it was just... I was in shock. I stood there in shock. Complete shock.

If you had the chance to serve under one other *Star Trek* captain, who would you choose?

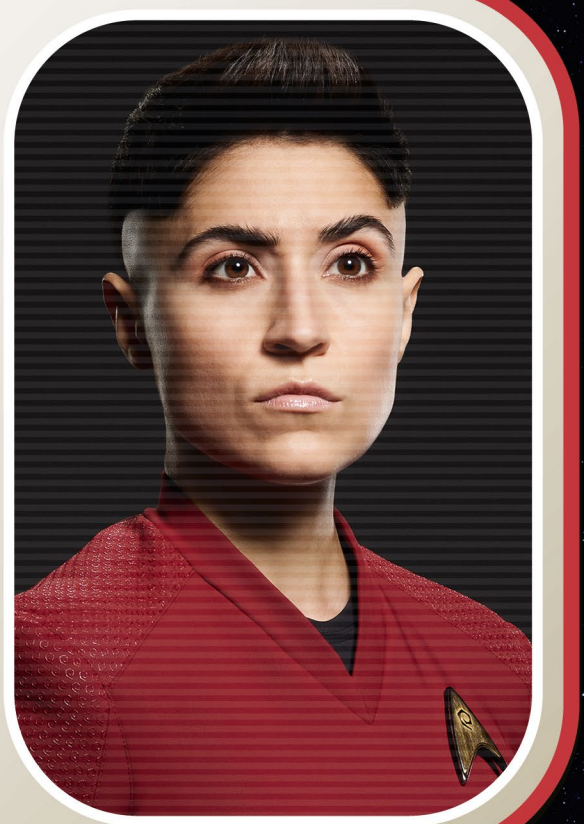
I would say Kirk, because he's very charming. And because, who knows... [meaningful smile]

STARFLEET PERSONNEL FILE

MELISSA NAVIA

ERICA ORTEGAS

NCC-1701/6 HELM



How did it feel stepping onto the bridge for the first time, knowing the role you were going to play?

My first thought, and it continued to be my thought throughout the first season, was, "I have to fly this thing, and it has to be real." So everybody was having a great time being like, "Wooh, this is all great," and I was legit Googling, "How do you fly a starship?"

I was doing Zoom workshops with people in production. I wanted to learn about the ship, about the engines, all this stuff. Everybody was making fun of me – "You know you don't really fly a starship, right?" and I'm like, "But I do!" The second you don't think you do you might as well all go home.

You have such a striking haircut in this show. Was there quite a discussion about Ortegas's look?

The producers sent me some of their ideas. A couple of the other ones were a little less severe but I was just like, you know what, she's a combat veteran, and she's also easygoing, right? For most of my life I've had short hair because it's more practical, it's cooler, you can do more with it, my hair grows fast. So as a pilot I'm going to want something that doesn't get in your face and is also just kind of chilled. It was definitely a discussion, but I fell in love with it.

And I credit Ethan [Peck] too, because Ethan was the first cast member I met and I was sitting with him in the hair trailer and I was like, "What do you think, man I've never met before?" And Ethan looked and said, "Go for that one", and I'm like, "Alright..." So I thank Spock for helping me come to this decision.

If you had the chance to serve under one other *Star Trek* captain, who would you choose?

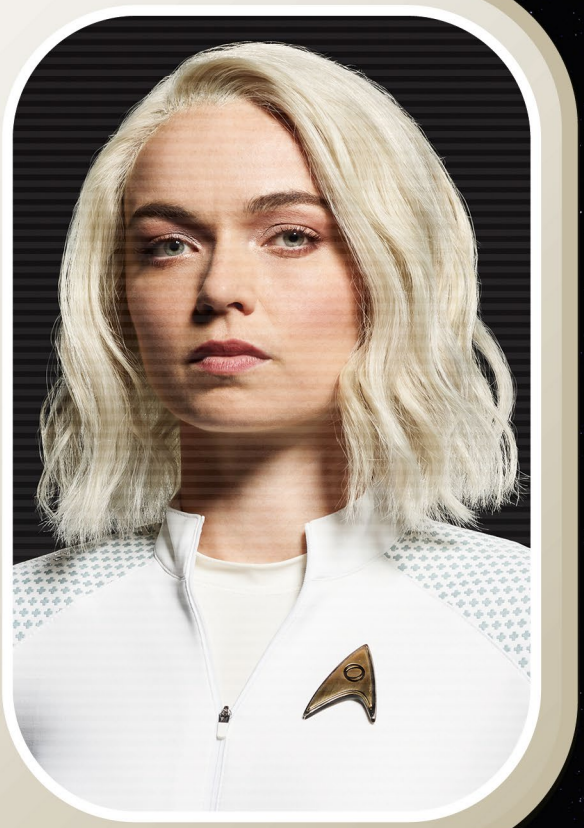
Captain Picard would be my bag. I still have to watch the full opening credits [to *The Next Generation*], because his voice is everything.

STARFLEET PERSONNEL FILE

JESS BUSH

CHRISTINE CHAPEL

NCC-1701/7 MEDICAL



How does it feel to enter the world of *Star Trek*?

Just the awareness of the enduring impact that *Star Trek* has had culturally, almost worldwide, and knowing that I'm about to have an opportunity to contribute to that as an artist is such an immense privilege and responsibility.

What intrigued you about playing Chapel?

It's an exciting creative challenge for me personally to have the opportunity to bring life into somebody who's lived before, and that hasn't been portrayed by anybody else since Majel [Barrett] created her. So that is both a huge responsibility and an epic, exciting challenge and I think the way they've given her a 2022 rebirth is really exciting. I'm really enjoying bringing her to life and finding out more about who she is.

Do you remember walking into sickbay for the first time?

It was emotional. I remember stepping in and it really, physically hitting me, like, "The level of artistry that has gone into this is unfathomable, the attention to detail, the care, the love..." You can see it in every corner of the sickbay. It's just so thoughtfully built.

Is it hard to hold on to *Trek*'s idealism in today's world?

It feels like it's a really important thing to do, to continue to share that message and the possibility of things being better, and rising to better things as human beings in the face of terrible circumstances, and connecting people back to their humanity at the core of it. Because there is always that opportunity, you know. To continue to shine a light on that feels like a really important cause.

In the original series Chapel had an unrequited crush on Spock. Are you looking forward to playing that?

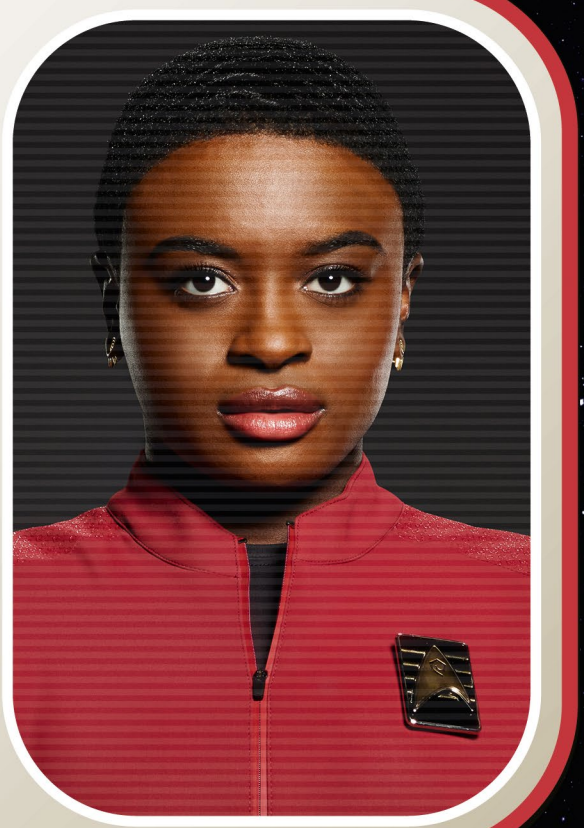
You'll just have to wait and see!

STARFLEET PERSONNEL FILE

CELIA ROSE GOODING

NYOTA UHURA

NCC-1701/8 COMMUNICATIONS



What intrigued you about Uhura when you first read the scripts?

The thing that really intrigued me about this character was that she had an understanding of what it means for her as the youngest person in the crew, as someone who's not really sure where she wants to be. She has an understanding of, "This is my job, and I have a job to do, but I'm also terrified of messing it up, and also terrified of doing well. I just have to get through these next couple of days and I can figure out my future later." And that energy of just trying to survive and impress the people that you're around is something that I as a person in the world is definitely moving through. It felt like someone had gone through my journal and had had a one-on-one with my therapist.

Do you remember stepping on to the bridge for the first time?

My first day on set was a bridge day, the first time I had ever seen the bridge. And there was this massive, sweeping crane shot, like a quick zoom on me, and I was so overwhelmed. And my line lost me completely. They were like, "Celia, that's your line!" And I was like, "What do I do? I don't know what I'm doing!" It was that awestruck feeling of, "We are in the place that we have been watching on TV for decades." I can only describe it as sensory overload, in the best way. I wanted to put my hands on everything. I was picking up props that didn't belong to me. I got in so much trouble.

If you had the chance to serve under one other *Star Trek* captain, who would you choose?

I would say Sonequa Martin-Green's captain on *Discovery*. As someone who looks up to her as a person and as an actor, it would be awesome just to have a moment to serve under her.

Star Trek: Strange New Worlds is on Paramount+ in the UK from 22 June.

REVERSE ENGINEER

TIME TRAVEL THRILLER **THE LAZARUS PROJECT** TAKES ON THE END OF THE WORLD. THE CLOCK IS TICKING... BACKWARDS

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**





Archie has a wee chat with George.



"No mugging to camera, please!"



Wes (Caroline Quentin): boo, hiss!



FORWARD MOTION. That's the essence of any good thriller, right? A tale that rattles from A to B, propulsive, relentless, *linear*. So what happens when you add a quantum wrinkle to the mix? A time-bending twist where your characters have the power to hit rewind – and erase? How much harder can a drama squeeze your nerve-endings when the past as well as the future is up for grabs?

Sky's new eight-parter *The Lazarus Project* is out to answer that. "It's an action thriller with a time travel component but with this big, moral, philosophical heart to it," says creator and writer Joe Barton. "It's really the story of an everyman who overnight discovers that the world is much more complex and dangerous and exciting than he thought."

Paapa Essiedu is George, the man plunged into this four-dimensional head trip. "He's just a normal guy, an app developer," Barton tells *SFX*. "He has this nice, easy life and it gets interrupted by this growing series of events. The world gets worse and worse and scarier and scarier and his partner gets sick.

"Just as it seems things are getting unbelievably grim he wakes up, six months earlier, on the day that we first meet him. He lives the next six months again but this time thinking he's gone slightly insane. And everything's slightly worse. All the things he did right the first time he messes up.

"He keeps experiencing these sudden time loops. And then he meets Archie [Anjli Mohindra], who explains that there's a team called the Lazarus Project, who are specifically there to undo extinction-level events, like huge pandemics or nuclear war, and that George has developed this organic ability to recall past timelines. These timelines happen all the time but we're not aware of them, because our brains aren't put together to recall time that gets undone.

"But George has mutated the ability. Because of that, he's brought into this group. It's an international organisation. And the question of who's actually behind it all is one of the questions of the series – who's actually pulling the strings."

D-DAY

For Barton it's been an opportunity to smash together genres. But for all the adrenaline surging on screen – the publicity describes it as "blistering", no less – it's a philosophical conundrum that drives the show.

"We have this group who are essentially action-adventure, like *Mission: Impossible* or even *Strike Back* or whatever. It's a group of people who go around the world and have adventures, essentially. So you have these big set-pieces, these things that they do where they know that if they're unsuccessful they can always go back and try again.

"But there's a moral question to the series, which is all about the morality of turning back time. That's a big debate. Even if you went back two weeks, or six months, at the outset it may seem like a good thing if you're stopping a nuclear bomb going off or a chemical weapons attack. But if you look at the reality of that, the conception of millions of children is down to the minutiae of the moment that two people meet. If you undo that, you undo life, you undo death. You actually change the lives of billions of people. Every time you do it there's a huge unseen cost."

> **"Just as it seems things are getting unbelievably grim he wakes up six months earlier"**

Manipulating timelines is also complicated by the fact that you can only return to the previous 1 July, and no earlier. That's checkpoint day. "The most you can go back is one year," Barton explains, "and if you do pass over the checkpoint you can't undo anything that happened previous to that.

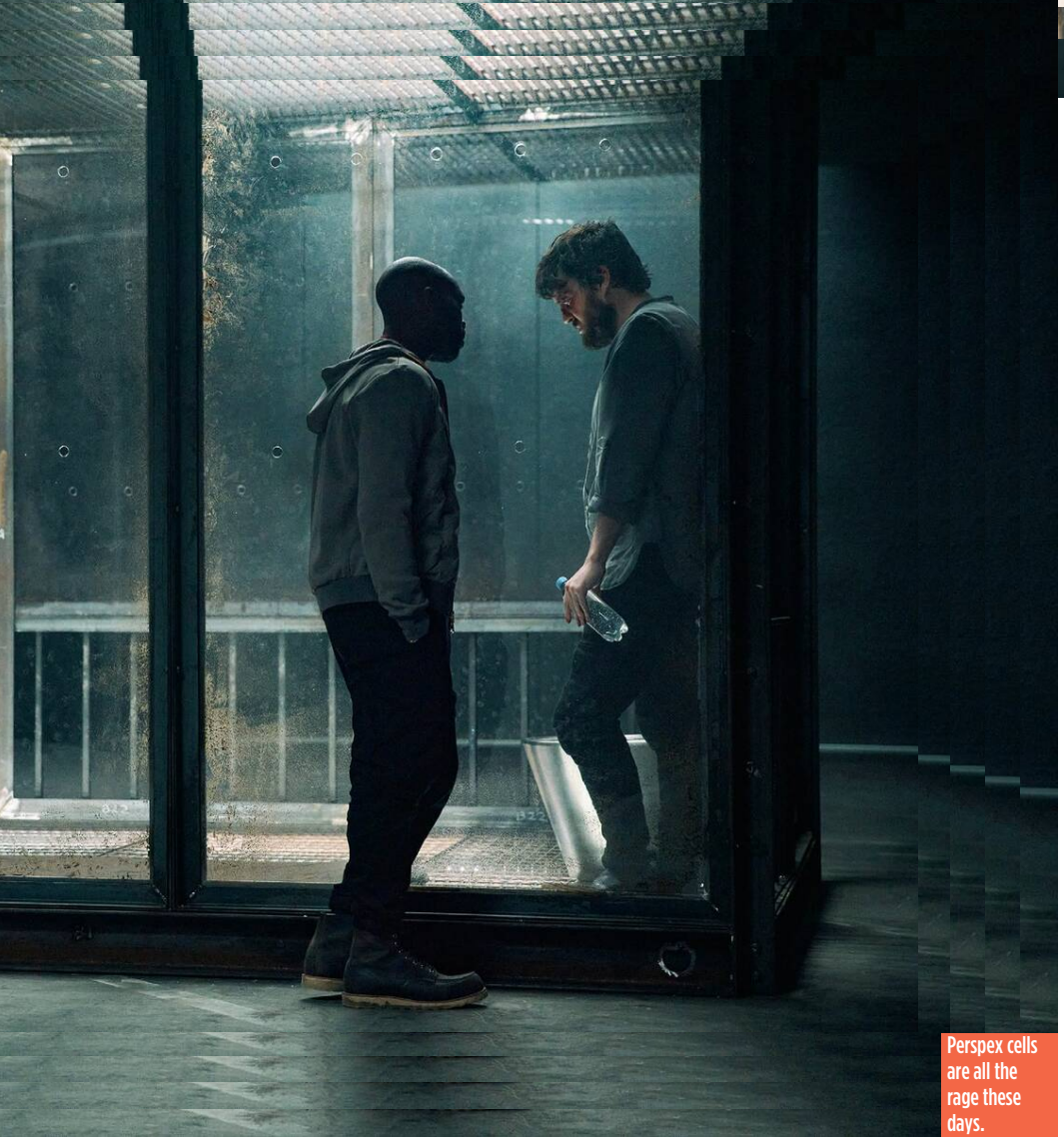
"For George, something happens on the day after the checkpoint that he's desperate to undo, which is that his partner is killed. They could bring her back, but you can't turn back time to save one person, because of this huge moral question around it.

"So the central dilemma for George is that he wants to force them to turn back time. The only way he can do that is by trying to engineer an extinction-level event somehow. He has to do worse and worse things and make the world a worse and worse place in the hope that it will get so bad that they reverse time."

With credits on everything from rural horror *The Ritual* to crime thriller *Giri/Haji*, Barton is known for character-led drama. 2021's *Encounter*, ostensibly an alien invasion tale, revealed itself to be an exploration of the crumbling psyche of Riz Ahmed's paranoid protagonist. Likewise *The Lazarus Project* burrows into George's head.

"We wanted him, initially, to be us. He reacts in a way most people would, waking up six months earlier and seemingly being the only person to know that's happened. He was intentionally made this everyman guy. As the show goes on, the things that he goes through, the things that he has to do, become more and more extreme.

"What is he willing to do to bring his partner back? What are the moral boundaries that he's



Perspex cells are all the rage these days.

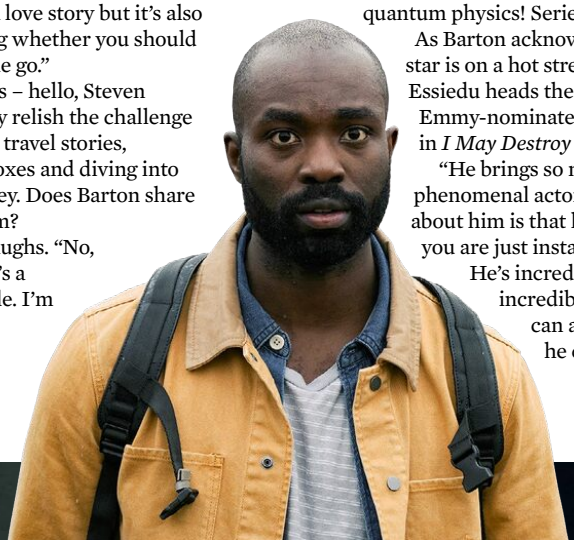
willing to step over? And is he redeemable at the end? It's almost like the way *Breaking Bad* took this quite normal guy and threw an extraordinary event at him, and then watched him become a villain. We're not making George a villain but we're certainly pushing him past the point where you would take most heroes."

Is it essentially a love story? "Yeah, it is," nods Barton. "It's all predicated on his love for this woman, his partner, that he's trying to rescue. He starts to remember every discarded timeline that he's ever lived through. You begin to realise that the narrative of your own life can sometimes be picked away. You met this person 15 times and you didn't fall in love, but it just so happened that the one time you did fall in love was the timeline that didn't get erased. So it's a love story but it's also about exploring whether you should just let someone go."

Some writers – hello, Steven Moffat – clearly relish the challenge of writing time travel stories, juggling paradoxes and diving into the timey-wimey. Does Barton share that enthusiasm?

"I did!" he laughs. "No, I do. It's fun. It's a different muscle. I'm fundamentally more of a character writer than a plot writer, so this was certainly the most intricately plotted thing I've ever done, which was a challenge. Time travel just is. Anyone that's written it will tell you. You have to have spreadsheets and whiteboards. Even once we'd filmed it we were still spotting things: 'Oh, wait a minute, that means... We shouldn't have done that, we'll have to change it in the edit!'"

Did he research the physics? "The premise is that it's not a time machine as much as it's a singularity, this sort of black hole in space that they're able to manipulate. The producers Urban Myth also make *War Of The Worlds*, and for that they also explored a time travel/black hole kind of thing, so they had some existing research on that. But no, I'm not an expert on quantum physics! Series two, maybe..."



As Barton acknowledges, the show's star is on a hot streak just now. Essiedu heads the cast after an Emmy-nominated breakthrough in *I May Destroy You*.

"He brings so much. He's just a phenomenal actor. What's so great about him is that he's someone that you are just instantly drawn to. He's incredibly funny, he's incredibly likeable, but he can also play the drama, he can play the darkness of the character. George is someone you need to root for, but he ends up doing some pretty bad stuff. You don't want to lose the audience but you also don't want the audience to forgive everything he does. So there's a lot of complexity in the role, keeping the audience on side to whatever degree.

"Paapa has just got something about him that you want to stick around and watch. He's very relatable. He can do the humour and the heart and all that stuff. We were very lucky to have him. He's in an amazing place in his career. He's just one of the best at the moment."

The series was originally titled *Extinction*. Why the change? Did *The Lazarus Project* just have a little more intrigue to it? "No, someone threatened to sue us!" laughs Barton. "Someone else had written something and wanted to call it *Extinction* and trademarked the title. And he got very litigious. And so we just thought, 'Fuck it.' I like the title *The Lazarus Project* very much. I also liked *Extinction* but maybe that would have been too gloomy. Maybe no one would have watched a show called *Extinction*!"

BE KIND REWIND

The title may be less on the nose but, as Barton tells *SFX*, the show very much taps into current anxieties about the future of the planet.

"It was written pre-pandemic, so it was odd to go through filming during an actual pandemic. It also touches upon war.

"One of the inspirations behind the idea was reading about things like the Cuban Missile Crisis. There are a worrying number of incidents in the past where we came very close to nuclear destruction, either because of an escalation in conflict or human error or technical error – nuclear missiles almost launched by mistake.

"The world is a very fragile place, which we're sadly aware of on a daily basis. I can't even read about climate change any more, it makes me so anxious. That fear for the future runs through everything."

And if Barton could rewind the timeline of his own writing career, what would he do? "I don't even know what I was doing last 1 July! I was fucking writing this, probably... No, were we filming it?"

Let's forget that pesky rule about the checkpoints. "If I could jump back to any time, career-wise? If you were jumping back it would be to undo things. There are some films and telly I did which maybe I would have done differently.

"But that's the thing. You almost never look back on your work and say, 'I wouldn't touch it, it's perfect'. In truth I would go back to everything and rewrite it. I'd be stuck in a permanent loop of revisions!"

The Lazarus Project is on Sky Max and NOW from 16 June.



THE HORUS HERESY IS THE ORIGIN MYTH FOR *WARHAMMER 40,000*. WE LOOK AT ITS JOURNEY FROM TABLETOP GAMING TO A BESTSELLING NOVEL LINE AND BACK AGAIN...

WORDS: **WILL SALMON**

LEGENDS OF THE FALL



"I WAS THERE THE DAY HORUS slew the Emperor..."

So begins *Horus Rising* by Dan Abnett, the first volume in a bestselling series of future-war novels that's run uninterrupted since 2006. Across more than 60 volumes, The Horus Heresy (published by Black Library) tells the story of what happens when the genetically engineered super-soldiers of the Adeptus Astartes – aka the Space Marines – fall out on a truly galactic scale. The resulting conflict lays the foundations for the *Warhammer 40,000* universe, and has inspired a range of audio dramas plus its own tabletop game, which is relaunched this month. Not bad for something that started with a single paragraph in an obscure book back in 1988.

FUTURE HISTORY

"The Horus Heresy is reckoned by many to be the greatest single disaster ever suffered by the Imperium," begins an innocuous boxout on page 13 of *Chapter Approved: The Book Of The Astronomican* – an expansion for the *Warhammer 40,000* game (known as *40K* to fans). Here we learn that Horus was a high-ranking general and "the most trusted servant of the Emperor", but "in his heart there dwelt a hidden evil, and he became seduced by this evil, and came to nurture demons and other forces of destruction".

These 142 words of somewhat purple prose were meant primarily as scene-setting background lore – "fluff" as gamers are sometimes wont to call this stuff – but it also had a practical purpose. Another game set in the *40K* universe, *Adeptus Titanicus*, was due for release that year. It came with six models in the box, moulded in red and blue plastic but otherwise identical. A civil war plot provided a neat explanation for why the players were fighting each other with the same miniatures.

The lore of the Heresy would be filled out gradually in various books and articles over the →



The contents of the new Horus Heresy set. Ooh.

next couple of decades. Horus, we eventually learned, was the finest of the Primarchs – one of the superpowered progenitors of the Space Marine legions. Wounded in battle, he became corrupted by the powers of Chaos, eldritch forces from beyond our reality. Powerfully charismatic, he turns several of the vast Space Marine legions to his side and sparks a conflict that costs billions of lives across the galaxy.

This rebellion became the foundation myth of the *40K* universe, encapsulated perfectly in Adrian Smith's striking image of the Emperor's confrontation with his fallen Warmaster. Although the loyalists technically win, things end badly for everyone involved. The conflict marks the beginning of the Imperium's slide from a secular project designed to unite humanity into a fanatical religious dystopia. Not for nothing is the slogan of *Warhammer 40,000* "In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war."

So, a cool backstory. It wasn't until the mid-2000s, however, and the launch of the novel line, that Games Workshop began to really explore it in-depth. This was a chance to delve deep into the mythic qualities inherent in this operatic tale of betrayal and to mine the human (and superhuman) drama there.

"It was a part of the milieu that we'd never been permitted to touch in fiction before," says Dan Abnett, looking back on the beginnings of the range. "It appealed to all of us immensely. But, oddly, when we started work, we didn't know if it would find an audience. In hindsight, that seems ridiculous, but we had our doubts."

He needn't have worried. The range was a hit from the off, both with gamers and the wider science fiction and fantasy-reading audience. Abnett's *Horus Rising* sold well, as did the books that followed. *A Thousand Sons* by Graham McNeill, the tenth novel, smashed into the *New York Times*' bestseller list. *Nemesis* by James Swallow did the same just a few months later.

That success wasn't just down to the lure of the *Warhammer* branding. The novels were often excellent: gripping, pacy and steeped in terrible irony. The cliché that the road to Hell is paved with good intentions is demonstrated time and again in a series that transforms the traitor legions from obvious villains into complex and nuanced characters, often with their own entirely valid reasons for turning their backs on the shifty, secretive Emperor.



> **"A dedicated community of players, podcasters and hobbyists has grown"**

"For a long time people looked down on tie-in fiction," says Guy Haley, another key writer. "But the Heresy, even when those prejudices held sway, transcended genre. The best of it is seriously good literature."

"We meet regularly for summits, either in person or by Zoom, and we talk individually all the time," says Abnett of how the range has been plotted by a core group of writers over the last 16 years. "There's so much material to keep on top of, and everyone has their area of specialism. We had no idea if we could effectively work as a group, but it became a fantastic experience as we got the hang of it. We've become a pretty tight-knit group, and *very* sarcastically refer to ourselves as the 'High Lords of Terra'."

Of course, most spin-offs from popular franchises are constrained in what they can and can't do. You couldn't, for instance, write a *Star Trek* novel where the Enterprise was destroyed without hitting the reset button at the end. But the *Warhammer* universe is so vast and dangerous that it offers writers plenty of room to innovate. While Games Workshop





Look out for this box cover art in yer local Workshop.

naturally maintains the final say on what gets through and what doesn't, the books have often added to or developed established lore in significant ways, such as in Abnett's *Legion*, which offered a radical new perspective on one of the Space Marine factions.

"While we had a deep respect for the existing lore, we had to bring in new things, as just rehashing what people already knew wouldn't be that interesting," says Graham McNeill, who's been writing for the series since the second book, *False Gods*. "One of our mantras was always bring something new to the table and take the stories you thought you knew and add layers to them."

Now, however, the series is approaching its endgame. Horus has reached Terra, and in the final books, rebranded as *The Siege Of Terra*, the protagonists are inching ever closer to a fateful final confrontation. Fans know how this story ends (here's a clue: lots of people die) but that doesn't mean that there won't be a few final surprises along the way...

"The ending is massive, the scale huge," says Abnett. "I've never written novels this big, either in word count or concept, with so many characters and moving parts. We have to get the 'canon' moments in and do them justice, but there's so much more going on than just the famous bits. Even at the very, very end, there are shocks in store."

Of course, everything to do with *Warhammer* must ultimately circle back to where it started: the tabletop. In October 2012 Forge World (Games Workshop's online store for specialist products) published a *40K* expansion with official rules for play in the Heresy setting. It quickly found its own niche with dedicated hobbyists, but remained a comparatively obscure part of the wider hobby.

Now it's time for it to go mainstream. This month the Horus Heresy is relaunched with a new rulebook and boxed set – *Age Of Darkness* – that contains everything you need to start playing. It's the biggest box the company has released, containing 40 Space Marines, 10 elite Terminators, two characters, a Dreadnought (basically an injured Marine interned in a gun-laden sarcophagus) and a Spartan battle tank. "A dedicated community of players, podcasters and hobbyists has grown around Heresy," says Games Workshop's Andy Hoare. "Thanks to this we can now take the game to a much wider audience, safe in the knowledge that the world is ready for it!"

AN AGE OF DARKNESS

Those who remember the early Rogue Trader days of *40K* will get a real kick from the set, as it heralds the long-awaited return of Mark VI Space Marines to prominence. For several generations of fans these distinctive, pointy-helmed "Beakies" defined the look and feel of the Astartes, but they've been more or less replaced in the modern game by the sleeker, taller Primaris models.

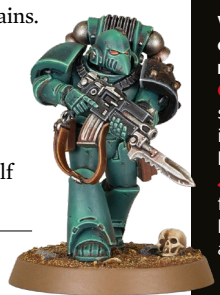
Crucially, while previous Heresy miniatures were mostly sold online, the new range will be available on the high street and made from plastic rather than expensive resin. As well as the Spartan, fans can look forward to a new iteration of the iconic Rhino troop carrier and a heavy Kratos battletank as the first in an expanded range of vehicles. "Massive war machines are as important to the setting as Space Marines," says Hoare.

Meanwhile, new campaign books will allow players to further explore the setting from their tabletops. "One thing we've been keen to do is to seed even more campaigns, so that players can really get inspired," he explains. "The great thing about the way we develop our settings is that a brief mention now might one day, in years to come, be spun out into entire supplements and lines of miniatures. After all, it's how the Horus Heresy itself got started."

The Horus Heresy is out on 18 June.

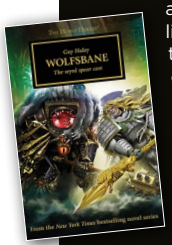


A happy Dreadnought does the thing it does best.



HERETICAL THINKING

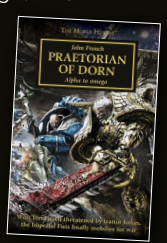
Authors Guy Haley and John French on the novels



What appeals about the setting?

GH: The scale of it, the hopelessness of it, the monstrousness and the nobility of the human race... I've been a science fiction fan all my life and I can honestly say that the Horus Heresy is one of the great pieces of British SF. It's up there with *Judge Dredd* and *Doctor Who*.

JF: It's less a conventional story and more a future history dystopia and disaster. There are hundreds of characters and perspectives that all entwine together. And it's got this weight and gravity. It's not played for laughs. The tone is sincere and the morality painted in grey rather than black and white. There's nothing else like it.



What would you say are the key themes?

GH: Hubris. Hope. Damnation. Free will versus predestination. It's a Greek tragedy, mankind against the gods and fate, still screaming our defiance as we inevitably fall. Brotherhood, the nature of power, the nature of mercy, the cold-blooded expression and utility of tyranny.



JF: Schism, arrogance and near-misses with better futures. At its core it's about people that were friends, comrades, family who are now trying to kill each other. There are so many near-misses with better outcomes in the series. If the Emperor had just told the Primarchs the whole truth of what he was doing, or if the Primarchs had been able to moderate their nature, all of it might not have happened as it did.



Which side would you choose? Loyalists or rebels?

GH: The Imperium! Even at its supposedly more enlightened outset it was a cruel, autocratic nightmare – but the alternative is so much worse.

JF: I honestly would do my best to fight with neither. It's a choice between bad and worse. Both sides are right and both utterly wrong.

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JULY 2022

Reviews

edited by Ian Berriman

CINEMA 70 | TV 74 | HOME ENTERTAINMENT 78 | BOOKS 86 | COMICS 92 | GAMES & STUFF 94



JURASSIC WORLD DOMINION 70

Living With The Enemy

THIS ISSUE **58** REVIEWS

Highlights



74

THE MIDWICH CUCKOOS

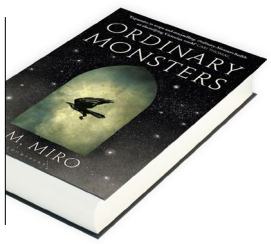
→ There's no blonde wigs in Sky's update of the classic John Wyndham novel.



78

THE BATMAN

→ Holy Bat-bonuses! But is the Blu-ray of the Matt Reeves movie worth, er, Robin? Sorry.



86

ORDINARY MONSTERS

→ Orphans with powers are brought together in this Victorian-era fantasy.

→ RATINGS EXPLAINED ★★★★★ SUPERB ★★★★☆ GOOD ★★★☆☆ AVERAGE ★★☆☆☆ POOR ★☆☆☆☆ TERRIBLE

JURASSIC WORLD DOMINION

One Of Our Dinosaurs Is Missing

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 147 minutes

Director **Colin Trevorrow**

Cast **Chris Pratt, Bryce Dallas Howard, Laura Dern, Sam Neill, Jeff Goldblum, BD Wong**

As a wise, leather jacket-clad man once observed, "Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn't stop to think if they should." So said Jeff Goldblum's Dr Ian Malcolm, offering a word of caution to Richard Attenborough's John Hammond in a pivotal scene from 1993's *Jurassic Park*. It's advice you occasionally wish the creators of *Jurassic World Dominion* had heeded, even if this final film in the trilogy is a thrilling, dino-driven action-adventure that finds some space for its characters to breathe.

Following on from *Fallen Kingdom*'s release of a clutch of prehistoric creatures out into the world, *Dominion* seeks to both address its own franchise legacy and keep you on the edge of your seat. It does the latter effectively, to sometimes numbing effect, as chase scene follows critter confrontation with clockwork reliability. In fact, the whole concept of humans suddenly forced to live alongside the flying/stalking/swimming beasts is essentially just the backdrop for a much more conventional story of finding the whatsit or stopping the bad person from doing the thing (in both cases, this can refer to the kidnapping of Raptor Blue's baby, Beta, a key plot point). That involves a globe-trotting journey ending up in a giant dino facility which evokes feelings of the locations from Steven Spielberg's films and the first *World* movie.

Though co-writer/director Colin Trevorrow has certainly scaled up his ambitions from even the widened scope of his first entry in the franchise, there's a permeating feeling that several of the set-pieces are designed to ape the original trilogy, albeit with more, and larger, dinosaurs. A hefty threat this time is the Giganotosaurus, referred to at least twice as the biggest carnivore to stalk the planet. It is, however, used relatively sparingly, and is just one of the toothy terrors on display here. Among the others that show up to menace/delight the protagonists are Atrociraptors, Ankylosaurs, Baryonyx, Compsognathus, Dreadnoughtus, Quetzalcoatlus and, keeping up the franchise hat-tips, more than one of those poisonous spitting fiends known as Dilophosaurus, offering a nod to Wayne Knight's ill-fated Nedry. A nodry?



"Why do they call it a Giganoto – oh."



"I *said* we should go to Champneys instead."

CGI is, naturally, utilised a lot, but there's still the welcome frisson of seeing animatronics and puppeteering on display, with certain creatures brought to life in reassuringly old-school ways that look completely believable. The biggest villain, nevertheless, is grasping humanity, always seeking new ways to exploit both the animals and the genetic tinkering that has brought them roaring back into the world. *Dominion* dives even further than *Fallen Kingdom* into that idea, swapping an animal auction for underground

> **"Finds some space for its characters to breathe"**



dino-rumbles. Most of the baddies are faceless hunters or traders, but the prime wrong 'un is an old one given a new face: Lewis Dodgson, the scheming executive briefly seen in Spielberg's initial outing, and here played by Campbell Scott as a mixture of tech bro stereotypes – he looks like Tim Cook but acts like Elon Musk. You know he's up to no good from the moment you glimpse him, even if you don't know his name/history.

Thank goodness, then, that he's in a franchise sequel designed to unite heroes from previous incarnations and the present *Jurassic* ensemble (there's a lot of that legacy casting in big movies right now). While Jeff Goldblum popped up in *Fallen Kingdom*, here he's the catalyst to bring back Laura Dern's palaeobotanist Ellie Sattler and Sam Neill as cranky palaeontologist Alan Grant. They slip back into their old roles with ease, and there's a warm charm to their chemistry. Trevorrow makes you wait for the big team-up with Bryce Dallas Howard's Claire Dearing and Chris Pratt's Owen Grady (who still spends half his screen time looking like he's trying to high-five Raptors), keeping the two groups apart on separate missions until the final act. Everyone else (Omar Sy, Justice Smith etc) is either a quick cameo or a relatively minor supporting role, though a few people pop against the regulars.

A sometimes uneasy blend of *Bourne*-with-a-Brachiosaurus thriller and *Jurassic* reference box-ticking, *Dominion* still delivers on the dino encounters, while avoiding having its human side trampled underfoot. **James White**

i Souvenirs Chris Pratt took home included the Raptor training clicker, his knife, his Isla Nublar ID and a Raptor tooth.

THEY WALK AMONG US

Four more examples of modern-day dinos

PRIMEVAL



Raptors in a shopping mall, a Mosasaur in a swimming pool, and a Pteranodon on a golf course were just some of the troubling scenarios faced by the team in ITV's noughties family show, in which critters pass through temporal anomalies.

SLIDERS: IN DINO VERITAS



In this season two episode of the parallel universes show, the heroes "slide" to an Earth on which dinosaurs still exist, but are an endangered species, with a nature preserve where San Francisco should be.

DOCTOR WHO: INVASION OF THE DINOSAURS



London is evacuated in this Jon Pertwee tale, in which a group plotting to roll back time empty the capital by transporting dinosaurs from the past via a "Timescoop", thereby pitting UNIT grunts against wobbly puppets.

ANONYMOUS REX



In Eric Garcia's 1999 novel (and the 2004 movie), some dinosaur species survived the Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction event, reduced in size, and live among us wearing human-suit disguises... The lead character is a Velociraptor private eye!

BBC, ITV, NBC



Magnus Pyke's new workout routine was paying off.

BRIAN AND CHARLES

Ex Washing Machina

★★★½☆

RELEASED 8 JULY

PG | 91 minutes

Director **Jim Archer**

Cast **David Earl, Chris Hayward, Louise Brealey, Jamie Michie**

The familiar story of a man and his robot pal gets a quirky British twist in this mockumentary film, the debut feature of director Jim Archer.

A camera crew follows lonely inventor Brian (David Earl) as he embarks on devising a series of failed inventions – a flying cuckoo clock, trawler nets for shoes, a belt for holding eggs – in a remote village in Wales. Eventually, he creates something incredible: Charles, a petulant robot who's essentially a walking washing machine with a mannequin head made to look like a professor stuck on top.

Written by David Earl and Chris Hayward (who also plays Charles), what follows is a charmingly droll buddy comedy with shades of *ET*-inspired sentimentalism. Earl plays Brian as an endearing eccentric, whose gruff asides to camera carry an undertone of sadness, while the absurd sight of Charles is a frequent delight (as is his Siri-esque voice). He's like a cheeky child, or a dog.

Complications soon arise as Brian becomes friendly with the shy Hazel (played by *Sherlock*'s Louise Brealey), making Charles jealous, and his invention soon attracts the unwanted attention of a family of local bullies. The premise can wear a little thin, but its heart is in the right place: inside a washing machine. **Stephen Kelly**

i The original short the film was expanded from was made for £500 in a Welsh Airbnb. Watch it here: bit.ly/brishort.

FIRESTARTER

Flaming kid

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 94 minutes

Director **Keith Thomas**

Cast **Zac Efron, Ryan Kiera Armstrong, Sydney Lemmon, Michael Greyeyes**

People die in this new *Firestarter*, but the real tragedy is that the movie itself could – and should – have been so much better.

Take one Stephen King novel, which has been brought to the screen to memorable (mostly for a young Drew Barrymore) but less-than-successful effect. Hire Keith Thomas, the director behind solid, creepy horror *The Vigil*. Have the Blumhouse team produce. Finally, bring in John Carpenter (alongside son Cody and fellow collaborator Daniel A Davies) to layer in a synth-heavy score. The result? Well... the music is good.

The rest is throwback mush, with mealy-mouthed dialogue and performances from the likes of Zac Efron (as Andy, the telepathic dad to a pyrokinetic pre-teen whose anger issues are quite literally fire) that aren't given room to be more than cheesy. Like Barrymore, Ryan Kiera Armstrong makes an impact as Charlie, bringing a subtle edge to her work, but around her it's clichés all the way.

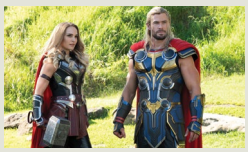
True, it's tough to escape that in a bog-standard clash between a shadowy government agency and parents on the run, with school bullies and more caught in-between. But this latest *Firestarter* finds nothing new to say or do, besides throw in a load of dodgy CG flames. **James White**

i Keep 'em peeled for a dumpster bearing a sign reading "Joyland" – a nod to Stephen King's 2013 novel.



"I aaam what I am, and what I am needs no excuses..."

ALSO OUT



No screenings for *Toy Story* spin-off **LIGHTYEAR** (18 June) before we went to press. Bah. **THE BLACK PHONE** (24 June) adapts a Joe Hill story about an abducted boy. Read more about *Despicable Me* prequel **MINIONS 2: THE RISE OF GRU** (1 July) on page 14. Asgard's loveable lunk takes on Gorr the God Butcher in **THOR: LOVE AND THUNDER** (8 July). And some old favourites are being reissued: **STAR TREK II: THE WRATH OF KHAN** (17 June) celebrates its 40th anniversary, and there are double-bills of **DR WHO AND THE DALEKS** and **DALEKS: INVASION EARTH 2150 AD** (8 July).

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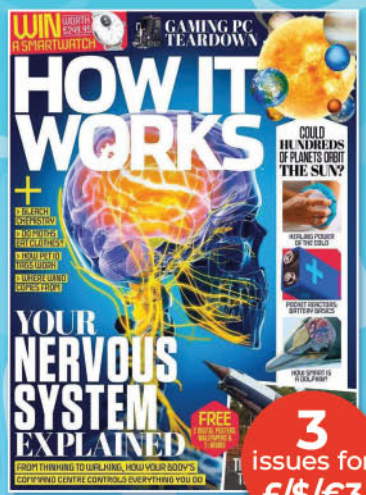
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Everyone loved school photo day, didn't they.

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- The lights flicker as the children use their powers. Ooh, spooky!
- Cuckoo mother Zoe looks like her eyes might pop out, or nervously bites her lip.
- Someone tries to move a body part, but can't.
- The Cuckoos all stand in a circle.



- People have a secret conversation somewhere they can be easily overheard.
- Angry dad Curtis gets very, very angry.
- DCI Kirby displays no visible emotion throughout a scene.

THE MIDWICH CUCKOOS

The children are our future

★★★½☆

UK **Sky Max, Thursdays; all episodes on NOW**

Showrunner **David Farr**

Cast **Keeley Hawes, Max Beesley, Aisling Loftus, Ukweli Roach**

EPISODES 1.01-1.07 **Adapting John** Wyndham's 1957 novel for television poses all manner of challenges: some to do with the difference between what works in a book and what works on screen; others related to the societal changes of the last 65 years.

The perspective is broadened out from the novel's clubbable authority figures, for whom the feelings of women were little more than data for observation. This Sky adaptation begins in familiar fashion: everyone living in a certain radius is inexplicably knocked out, then all the women capable of giving birth are discovered to be pregnant. Thereafter, however, the focus – certainly in early episodes – is much more on the psychological impact, with central character Zellaby gender-swapped to a female counsellor (Keeley Hawes), and the Bechdel Test passed with flying colours. It very much leans into domestic drama, and some of the differing reactions are genuinely affecting. What aren't explored in any great depth are the big science fiction ideas inherent in the tale.

These "Cuckoos" are non-identical and racially diverse. The logic behind this is persuasive: it's better camouflage. Other solutions to the challenges of adaptation are more questionable. It stretches credulity that such a phenomenon could be kept under wraps in the age of social media. The families are urged to sign the Official Secrets Act and offered generous stipends; their lives are monitored, rogue Facebook posts shut down. But that still doesn't seem enough.

Tweaking the "hive"'s abilities so that they can no longer read minds (no need to picture a brick wall here) feels like a bit of a cop-out, one which the addition of new powers – such as hurling people through the air by having the stunt crew yank their harness – doesn't fully compensate for.

The last thing you want to do with Wyndham's work is render it overblown (we're looking at you, the people who put a plane crash into *The Day Of The Triffids*...), but at times it all feels a little too low-key. Max Beesley's Midwich copper/MacGyver-in-waiting is so self-controlled he's barely there. You assume he's simmering away, set to explode, but barring a yell of, "What the fuck are we gonna do?", the lid stays firmly on. And it's a petty point, but did all the interiors have to be so suffocatingly bland? It gets to the point where you cheer when someone paints a wall.

Still, *Midwich* is a tough nut to crack, and there are some very ingenious innovations here, including a Cuckoo who wants to be an individual, an effective penultimate episode rug-pull, and a grisly spin on a key death from the novel. And some of the young cast – particularly Indica Watson as the older Evie – are exceptional, arguably outshining their grown-up co-stars. **Ian Berriman**

i John Wyndham started work on a sequel called *Midwich Main*, but abandoned it after writing just six chapters.

FIRST KILL Season One

Stake-crossed lovers

★★½☆☆

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**

Showrunner **Felicia D Henderson**

Cast **Sarah Catherine Hook, Imani Lewis, Elizabeth Mitchell, Jonas Dylan Allen**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **"Lesbian *Buffy*"** is not just a crass, reductive way to describe *First Kill*. It's also not very accurate. "Lesbian *Vampire Diaries*" would be a better way to manage your expectations. It's not so much Buffy and Angela as *The Unoriginals*.

Sure, there are vampires, slayers (or hunters, as they're called here), witches and a variety of dodgy CG demons, plus some high school teen angst– all very *Buffy*. But stylistically, *First Kill* is *The Vampire Diaries* to the core: overwrought, melodramatic supernatural soap, featuring well-off characters in big houses snogging and/or killing each other, all set to a relentless, wall-to-wall soundtrack of whiny pop and insipid R 'n' B.

It's a shameless *Romeo And Juliet* do-over, too. Juliette (oh yes, it's that on-the-nose) is a teen vampire yet to make her first kill, who falls for Calliope Burns, the youngest daughter of a monster-hunting family, who's yet to make *her* first kill.

Obviously they try to kill each other, but soon they're scandalising both their families by shagging all over the place in a series of really dull, The CW-level sex scenes.

> **"Well-off characters in big houses snogging and/or killing each other"**



"Do you think Sissy Spacek can hear us canoodling?"

There's absolutely nothing new to see here. After all, it's not like *Buffy*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* didn't boast supernatural sapphic storylines too. To be fair, *First Kill* does spotlight the relationship as the core of the show, so that's a minor step forward, and the two teen leads have the sparky charisma and the chemistry required to pull it off. There's also the occasional moment of Grand Guignol silliness to liven things up. But for the most part, *First Kill* is a reheated ready meal of a vampire show.

Dave Golder

i Calliope's family belong to a low rank of hunter known as Blade Class – surely a shout out to Marvel's Daywalker?

NIGHT SKY Season One

Something starry in the woodshed

★★★☆☆

UK/US **Amazon Prime, streaming now**

Showrunners **Daniel C Connolly, Holden Miller**

Cast **Sissy Spacek, JK Simmons, Chai Hansen, Julieta Zylberberg**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Forget about** fairies at the bottom of the garden. Sweet old devoted couple Frank and Irene York, of sleepy, rural Farnsworth, Illinois, have something far more exciting: a portal to another world under their shed.

Not that they've explored much of that world; the portal leads to a sealed viewing pod looking out on an alien landscape, and though there's an airlock, they've been too scared to use it. After all, the atmosphere could be poisonous. In all the years they've been going there they've seen no sign of life.

Not until a wary young man called Jude (Chai Hansen) appears in the pod, that is. He clearly has secrets, but while Frank (JK Simmons) is suspicious, to the ailing Irene (Sissy Spacek), Jude is a reason to grab hold of life again.

Night Sky works best as a character study of its two central OAPs. They may appear to be the perfect, loving old couple, but there are cracks in the relationship, which Jude's arrival threatens to cleave wide open. In this respect the series benefits massively from the acting talents of Spacek and Simmons, who play Irene and Frank with a touching fragility. Even their neighbours' marriage – which at first feels more of a TV cliché (goofy guy with long-suffering practical wife) – is revealed to have considerably more poignancy.

> **"It works best as a character study of its two central OAPs"**



"Girls, could you keep it down a bit, please?"

Sadly, the show also wants to be a high-concept SF thriller, and that's where it falls down. Jude's backstory – revealed in a dragged-out drip-feed of information – turns out to be pretty run-of-the-mill sci-fi thriller guff. The fact that the season ends with some intriguing questions left unanswered is offset by the worry that on the evidence so far, any eventual answers might be underwhelming. **Dave Golder**

i JK Simmons previously starred in *Counterpoint*, an SF TV show about a mysterious underground portal...

STRANGER THINGS

Season Four, Volume One

Upside Down turned inside out

★★★★☆

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**

Showrunner **The Duffer Brothers**

Cast **Winona Ryder, Millie Bobby Brown, Gaten Matarazzo, Natalia Dyer**

EPISODES 4.01-4.07 **Though there** will be a fifth and final season of *Stranger Things*, season four feels very much like the beginning of the end. The *Infinity War* before the *Endgame*, you might say, drawing in elements from all the previous seasons, and creating one final, worthy end-of-level boss whose origins are cleverly woven into the mythos of the show.

It's also a season painted on a broader canvas. Not only are there more episodes (well, there will be, when the final two episodes are released in July), but they expand in running time (the cliffhanger instalment here is 98 minutes) and the action, instead of being based mainly in the small town of Hawkins, is split between three (eventually four) main locations and sets of characters. Two of these locations would be major spoilers to mention, but Joyce, Eleven, Jonathan and Will have now relocated to California and Mike joins them on vacation early on in the run. Oh, and there's a lot more time spent in the Upside Down too.

Because there's a new threat in Hawkins. Mangled bodies of teenagers are turning up all over town. With the mid-'80s media full of reports about the corrupting influence of *Dungeons & Dragons* on young minds, the townsfolk start pointing their pitchforks towards Eddie Munson, the drug-dealing Dungeon Master of Dustin, Lucas and Mike's *D&D* club. But Dustin and co quickly realise that the Upside Down has unleashed a new horror. As does their old ally from the US government, Sam Owens – now retired – who tells Eleven that things are about to get very, very bad, and they need to get her powers back in action.

After the neon-coloured, über-'80s nostalgia and goofy tone of season three, season four feels more dour. Don't worry, silly moments and snappy dialogue are still very much in evidence, but there's a darker, bleaker underlying tone.

The geeky, misfit kids who were a major part of the show's early charm are significantly older now, so the show can't just rely on them being cute. There's a lot of teen angst here, and not all of it works – especially not the bullying of Eleven, which feels cartoonish and contrived. But Gaten Matarazzo remains brilliant as Dustin, and his comedy partnership with Joe Keery's Steve is reliably watchable.

The horror elements have also been ramped up, very effectively. The Big Bad's MO is delightfully grisly, while Eleven's storyline contains some intense imagery. It also has the major plot twists, which eventually pull various plot threads together in an ingenious and heart-pounding revelation. This show certainly still knows how to deliver an exciting, stylish set-piece. *Stranger Things* may no longer have the shock of the new, but it still has shocks – and ideas – aplenty. **Dave Golder**



Teens: they're always moaning, aren't they?

i Converse (of All-Stars fame) created three new shoes in Hawkins High colours for use in a pep rally scene.



VAMPIRE IN THE GARDEN

★★½☆☆

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**

Director **Ryotaro Makihara**

Cast **Megumi Han, Yu Kobayashi, Rika Fukami, Chiaki Kobayashi**

EPISODES 1.01-1.05 **Recently,** Netflix has cancelled swathes of animated productions. While that didn't affect this expensive anime, *Vampire In The Garden* still arrives feeling rather unfinished. It's not horror – for gory animated vampire action, stick with *Castlevania*. Rather, it's an escape story, about a vampire and a human girl striving to leave their violent world together.

It begins in the midst of a war between vampires and humans. Because vampires have keen senses, humans have banned music – something mourned by Momo, the perky daughter of a stern female commander. After rowing with her mum, Momo flees her human city just as it's attacked by vampires, and encounters Fine, a vampire queen estranged from her own kind. At first they bond over music, and later their friendship deepens.

Animated by the Wit studio, which made much of *Attack On Titan*, the series' snowy world often looks lovely, but the writing is laughably flimsy. There's not nearly enough grounding for the characters' actions, emotions or the world that they live in. It's a pity, because the basic idea is good enough that you want it to develop. Anime fans also won't be surprised by *Vampire*'s refusal, typical in this medium, to confirm that the two girls' relationship is a lesbian romance. **Andrew Osmond**

STAR TREK: PICARD
Season Two
The Queen's Gambit

★★★☆☆

UK **Prime Video, streaming now**
US **Paramount+, streaming now**
Showrunner **Terry Matalas**
Cast **Patrick Stewart, John de Lancie, Alison Pill, Jeri Ryan**


"I *saw* you take my Werther's Originals."

EPISODES 2.01-2.10 ***Picard*'s second** season is a voyage home in more ways than one. Jean-Luc is enjoying retirement when Q (John de Lancie) returns and flings the La Sirena gang into an alternate timeline ruled over by the authoritarian Confederation. To prevent this reality coming to pass, our heroes must travel to 2024 and set history back on the right path – but that means allying with the Borg Queen and foiling a plot by villainous scientist Adam Soong (Brent Spiner).

There's a lot going on here, with rapidly shifting locations and tangled plotting, but the first half of the season is so enjoyable that it's easy to forgive the odd misstep. The beats are familiar – it's basically *Star Trek IV* meets *First Contact*; the other timeline effectively the Mirror Universe without the kink trappings – but it's exciting, funny, and Ito Aghayere gives a winning performance as a young Guinan.

Somewhere around the halfway point, however, those wobbles become a drunken lurch. Look, it's been a long time since the Borg were a credible threat, but the Queen spends most of the season simply smirking in the background like your vindictive grandma. Soong's transition from amoral scientist to Bond villain is abrupt, to say the least. And the finale wraps up the season's tangled plot at warp speed before luxuriating in a series of epilogues designed to write out most of the regulars, as if to say, "We've got the *TNG* cast back next year. So long, suckers!"

John de Lancie, at least, is exceptional, adding notes of real anger to Q's requisite arrogance. His final scenes with Picard, especially, are so good they help retroactively shore up the season's big idea: that Jean-Luc has been carrying a secret familial burden his entire life. It's a wonderful moment of warmth in a series that changes the *Star Trek* universe in ways both meaningful and bizarre.

Will Salmon

i As well as Data, Brent Spiner has now played six additional characters in *Star Trek*. He's back again next season.

THE TIME TRAVELER'S WIFE Season One
Get 'Em To The Church On Time

★★★★☆

UK **Sky Atlantic, Mondays**
US **HBO, Sundays**
Showrunner **Steven Moffat**
Cast **Theo James, Rose Leslie, Desmin Borges, Everleigh McDonell**


"I wish I had a car like that." "Oh, you will."

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **If you're not** familiar with the central concept of *The Time Traveler's Wife* (previously a novel and film), it's both simple and wonderfully complicated. A man (Henry) travels in time (he's not in control of this) and repeatedly meets his wife Claire as a child. He gets to see the woman he loves grow up; she gets the best imaginary friend ever and eventually marries him.

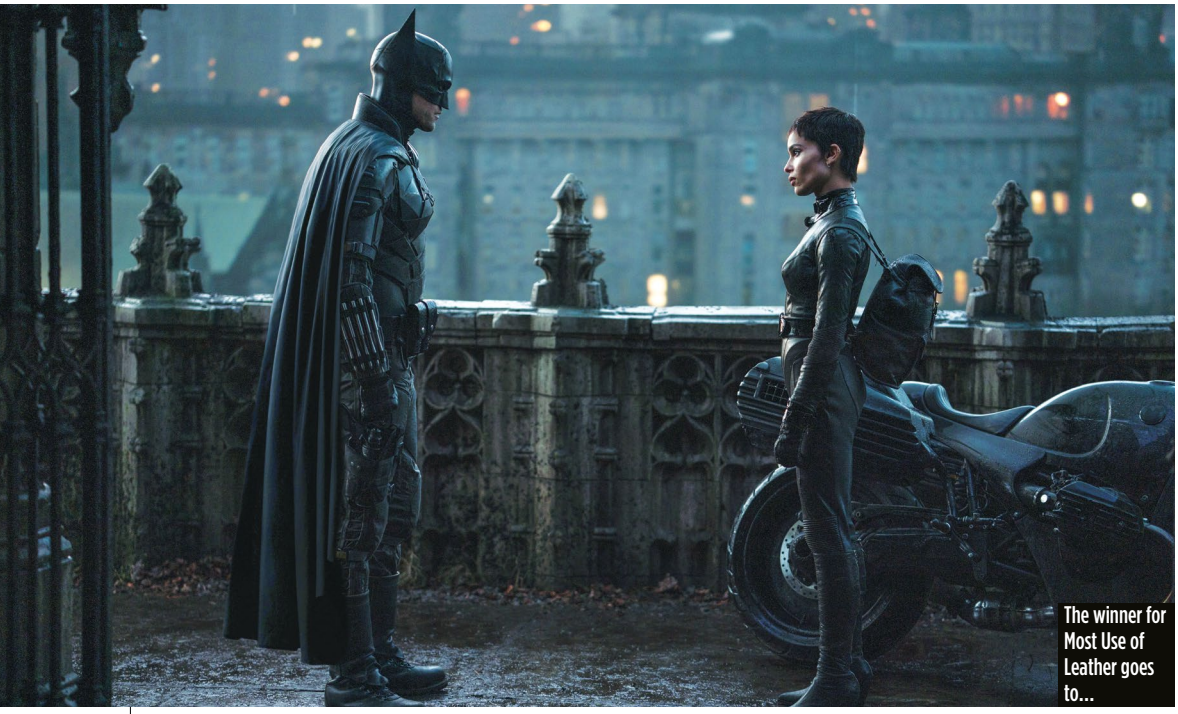
From one perspective, it's a wonderfully romantic tale of two lovers who both shape the person the other becomes, just out of order. From another, of course, it's potentially a slightly creepy tale of grooming a young girl. This adaptation doesn't shy away from that, but it doesn't fully tackle it either, instead concentrating on the consequences of teenage Claire's decisions after Henry tries to deflect her interest by lying about their future. Really, you just have to go with it.

This is made easier by the likeable charm and chemistry of the two leads, Rose Leslie (*Game Of Thrones*) and Theo James (*Divergent*). From the first moment they meet as adults they sparkle, allowing the science and the high-concept to take a back seat to themes of relationships, loss, grief and survival.

That's not to say the time travel aspect is ignored – there is a brilliant realisation of Henry tumbling through time, from one important scene to another, moments interleaved like fine carpentry. Not exactly surprising from Steven Moffat, who drew heavily on the book as inspiration when writing *Doctor Who*, but it's pleasing to see his eye for relationships and witty dialogue is as keen as ever. It's a real shame this season doesn't cover the whole novel, leaving teased elements without a pay-off, but hopefully we won't be left waiting too long for series two.

Rhian Drinkwater

i Audrey Niffenegger, author of the book, is married to comics artist Eddie Campbell, best known for Alan Moore's *From Hell*.



The winner for Most Use of Leather goes to...

THE BATMAN

Here Comes The Wayne Again

★★★★½ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2022 | 15 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)/DVD/download

Director **Matt Reeves**

Cast **Robert Pattinson, Paul Dano, Zoë Kravitz, Jeffrey Wright, John Turturro, Andy Serkis**

Titling your film *The Batman* is nothing if not ambitious. This character has been a one-man multiverse for over 80 years, incarnating as everything from a gothic spectre of vengeance to an ickle Lego man. It's fair to say that he punches the definite article in the face.

Matt Reeves leans into the darkness. Gloomy, intense and brutal, *The Batman* continues the Dark Knight's seemingly ever-grimmer trajectory on the big screen. If Christopher Nolan found inspiration in *Heat* and the Bond movies then Reeves synthesises such labyrinthine crime dramas as *The Godfather* and *Chinatown* with the bleak, clammy vibe of David Fincher's serial killer tale *Seven*.

Michael Giacchino's insistent piano motif – *Jaws*-like in its relentless simplicity – reinforces the idea of Batman as some invincible urban legend. But elsewhere Reeves humanises him in genuinely interesting ways. A number of scenes find our hero boxed in, squeezed into rooms instead of sweeping through a city skyline. Attending a crime scene, we sense his discomfort as he mixes with cops who clearly clock his essential weirdness. Among the normies he suddenly seems borderline ridiculous in his cape and mask, but vulnerable and real, too. That's new.

While Robert Pattinson makes for a haunted, driven Batman – his Bruce Wayne is barely existent – Paul Dano's Riddler ultimately feels like a rote crazed maniac, too far from his comic book roots. Thankfully Zoë Kravitz's kick-ass pixie of a Catwoman more than compensates for this.

> **"Among the normies he suddenly seems borderline ridiculous"**

At three hours it's an immersive, oppressive experience. This darkest of Dark Knights may not deliver the definitive Batman, but it makes a persuasive case.

Extras Though ostensibly a standard batch of bonuses, the special features do provide a decent level of insight into the movie's production. The highlight among them is lead documentary "Vengeance In the Making" (53 minutes), which captures Reeves and his cast and crew during the process. Pattinson talks about his nerves putting on the suit (and auditioning in the *Batman Forever* get-up, which made him feel "like a statue"), while there are generous segments for the rest of the main cast and primary creatives. Some candid moments reach beyond the basic press kit vibe of everyone having a great time at work, but like the film itself, it could have done with more Andy Serkis.

Almost everything else here feels like an off-cut of that doc. "Looking For Vengeance" (five minutes) explores Pattinson's fight training and stunts. "The Batman: Genesis" (six minutes) is a little more interesting, with Reeves sharing the journal he wrote based on researching the comics and the character, with some revealing nuggets about his journey to making the movie. "Vengeance Meets Justice" (eight minutes) explores the clash between Batman and Paul Dano's Riddler, while "Becoming Catwoman" (eight minutes) is self-explanatory.

Petrolheads will enjoy the nuts and bolts of making the new ride in "The Batmobile" (10 minutes), though it could perhaps have been merged with "Anatomy Of A Car Chase" (six minutes). "Anatomy Of The Wing Suit Jump" (six minutes) shows the various iterations of Batman's big glide, including an idea for it to zip into place that was quickly ditched because it took too long and would have looked silly on screen. "Unpacking The Icons" (five minutes) details the main characters' props and costumes, while "A Transformation: The Penguin" (eight minutes) digs beneath the skin of Colin Farrell's considerable prosthetics.

Finally, two deleted scenes – Scene 52 Joker/Arkham (six minutes) and Scene 56 Selina Gets 44 Below Keycard (two minutes) – are the scene already put online and an extra moment with Selina and Penguin. Both come with Reeves commentary on why they were cut, and his thoughts on the Joker are worthwhile. Note: buy the DVD and all you get is "Unpacking The Icons".

Nick Setchfield/James White

i There's a bust of Shakespeare in Wayne Manor, a nod to the iconic prop that unlocked the Batcave in the '60s TV show.

EDGE OF SANITY

Jack Your Body

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 20 JUNE
1989 | 18 | Blu-ray
Director **Gérard Kikoïne**
Cast **Anthony Perkins, Glynis Barber, Sarah Maur Thorp, David Lodge**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Given the countless** adaptations, how do you find a fresh angle on Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde? Why, by hiring a director of French porn, of course!

"Norman Bates plays Jekyll and Hyde" is the USP of this lurid, provocatively sexualised take, which toplines Anthony Perkins, and collapses Hyde and Jack the Ripper into a single figure.

But the most intriguing element is the creative use of anachronism. Whenever Jekyll transforms (by smoking what looks like a crack pipe), we enter a Dutch-angled realm of doxies in neon-pink rah-rah skirts and bleach-blond pimps who look like they've just stepped out of Heaven. And whenever the decadent Hyde enters a brothel, complete with writhing, semi-naked nuns, it's like Ken Russell has been installed in the director's chair.

The star is rather long-in-the-tooth for such goings-on; no one needs to see a threesome where a 56-year-old goth strokes off in the background. He fails to convince as someone with "the strength of a wild beast". The lack of any physical change (beyond pale skin and red eyeliner – Perkins looks like he's about to do The Cramps' Lux Interior on *Stars In Their Eyes*) disappoints. And it all fizzles out in anticlimax.

However, with its MTV aesthetic and homoerotic vibes, the approach is sufficiently transformative to make this a steaming potion worth quaffing.


"This definitely isn't arousing me. Not one jot."

Extras Director Gérard Kikoïne is winningly gregarious, discussing first his "love films" (21 minutes), then this one (24 minutes), with insights into how he created "two different universes". A bizarre anecdote about the star dressing as a Boy Scout is the highlight of producer Ed Simons's contribution (12 minutes). Stephen Thrower provides an insightful yet accessible appreciation (26 minutes); there's also an interesting talking head by Dr Clare Smith (29 minutes), author of a book on representations of the Ripper. Plus: a notes-free, conversational commentary by writers David Flint and Sean Hogan; trailer; booklet.

Ian Berriman

i Early on in his career, director Gérard Kikoïne worked on the French dub for Hammer's *Dr Jekyll And Sister Hyde*.

MARDI GRAS MASSACRE

Carnival Of Carnage

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 27 JUNE
1978 | 18 | Blu-ray
Director **Jack Weis**
Cast **William Metzo, Curt Dawson, Gwen Arment, Laura Misch**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **It's a shock to learn** that the director of this torture-porn precursor – notorious as a "video nasty" – has credits on *Live And Let Die* and for Sergio Leone, as it feels like the work of people who'd not only never made a movie before, but never *seen* one.

Aping Herschell Gordon Lewis's *Blood Feast*, it sees a killer taking home New Orleans hookers and sacrificing them to an Aztec goddess – though how oiling up their breasts fits into that tradition is unclear. This involves slicing up latex abdomens to hoik out lambs' hearts. Fortunately for him, none of the women have any ribs.

It's a shoddy effort, mostly made up of interminable medium shots. Don't expect a waitress with lines to be granted a close-up. Do expect the top third of the killer's head to be regularly sliced off. The editing is equally incompetent, unless all those jarring jump-cuts are meant to be avant-garde.

The script is utterly witless; despite multiple witnesses, the killer is identified not by the cops coming up with a photofit but by tramping around local businesses showing a drawing of his ring.


"Mmf mm mmn, mmmf mm mmf mmm mm."

Thankfully, he treated one victim to a final Chinese takeaway...

Guerilla filming during Mardi Gras adds a little colour, and the whole sorry affair holds a certain car-crash fascination, but it remains cynical, sleazy trash.

Extras Three entertaining new interviews. Discussing his starry career, director Jack Weis (25 minutes) comes across as an amusing old rogue. Male lead William Metzo (16 minutes) has some good anecdotes (his "robe" was a blanket) – and shows us that ring! Finally, victim Laura Misch (nine minutes) recalls shooting in a freezing warehouse, and suggests that *Plan 9 From Outer Space* isn't the worst film ever. She may have a point. Plus: trailer. **Ian Berriman**

i William Metzo recalls warming up the oil he had to rub on the victims, so they weren't quite so cold. What a gentleman.

MORBIUS

The Price Is Bite

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 27 JUNE (download out now)

2022 | 15 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)/DVD/download

Director **Daniel Espinosa**

Cast **Jared Leto, Matt Smith, Adria Arjona, Jared Harris**

While the box office success of *Spider-Man: No Way Home* demonstrated nearly two billion dollars' worth of residual affection for Sony-branded web-slinging – even the *Amazing* iteration – the studio's stab at building a cinematic universe of Spidey-adjacent anti-heroes continues to stumble rather than swing.

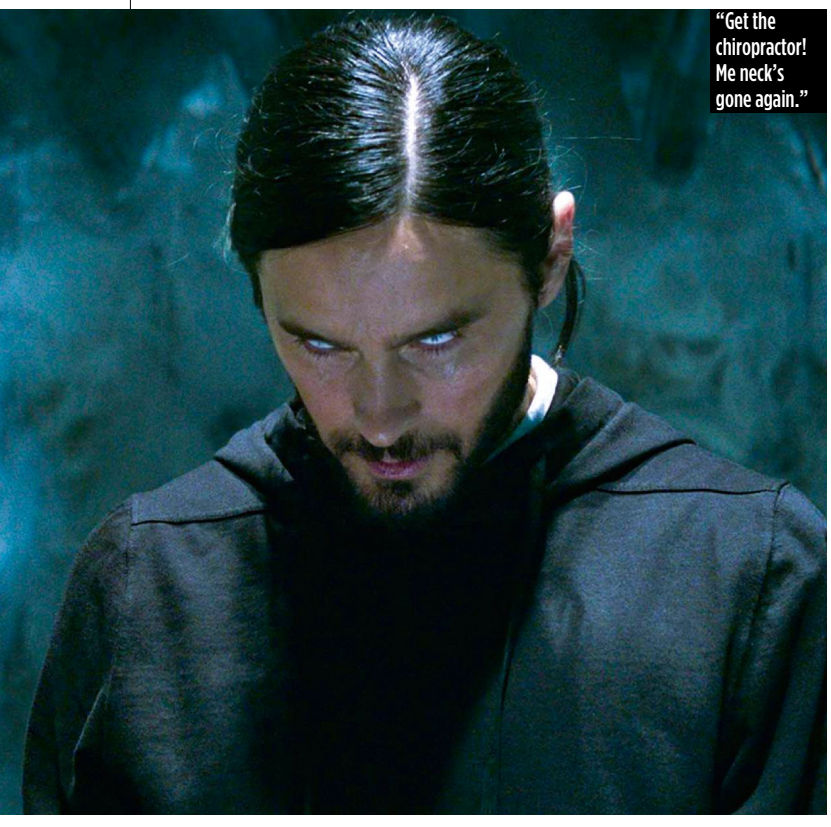
Jared Leto is techno-vampire Michael Morbius, an early '70s comic book foe redeployed in the '90s as a brutal agent of justice. Despite a Peter Parker-shaped hole in the story, Daniel Espinosa's movie is reasonably faithful to the character's origins: a scientist with a rare, seemingly incurable blood disorder splices his genes with bat DNA and everything goes a bit Bela Lugosi.

To Leto's credit, he's not afraid to get ugly. In vampire mode he's equally faithful to the comics, a goth beast with Royston Vasey nostrils and a faceful of needle-sharp fangs. Some overly pretty digital effects attempt to visualise Morbius's ability to track wind vectors, but he looks like he's trailing wisps of paint; along with some faux-Bullet Time styling, it's unnecessary ornamentation that robs the action scenes of authentic physicality.

Pitting Morbius against Matt Smith's lifelong pal turned rival bloodsucker, this is an undemanding plod of an origin tale, playing out in a drab world of cops and hospital corridors that is at least a counterpoint to the MCU's more cosmic ambitions. It feels tropey, uninspired – inevitably someone declares "It's not a curse, it's a gift," though that at least reverses the cliché – and just a little early '00s in the modern age of superhero cinema.

"There's something missing from my DNA," says Michael Morbius. Weighed against Marvel's confident, colourful winners, it's self-knowledge that Sony surely shares.

Extras A set of behind-the-scenes featurettes proves a sobering reminder of the craft and talent behind even the whiffiest of wannabe blockbusters. A look at the stuntwork (five minutes) highlights Gary Powell's impressive fight choreography, while a more general piece (five minutes) finds helmer Espinosa talking of his ambition to marry Asian martial arts cinema with the grit of '70s celluloid. Which... would have been great. Another mini-doc focuses on the character of Michael Morbius (five minutes), described with no discernible irony as "A very different superhero, just like Venom." Other featurettes cover the cast (three minutes) and digital effects (five minutes).



> **"This is an undemanding plod of an origin tale"**

Outtakes and bloopers (two minutes) reveal a cast member's kleptomaniac tendencies, while a skim of the Easter eggs (two minutes) points out some potential franchise expansion concealed on the front page of the *Daily Bugle*... Finally, a round-up of marketing odds and sods (five minutes) includes Leto fronting a mock ad for a bloodstain removal kit and a montage of the global publicity tour, chiefly notable for the Cruella-level spectacle of the star's wardrobe choices. **Nick Setchfield**

i During a subway scrap, you see an ad for "Thomas And Kane" – a nod to *Morbius* creators Roy Thomas and Gil Kane.



OFFSEASON

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2022 | TBC | SVOD

Director **Mickey Keating**

Cast **Jocelin Donahue, Joe Swanberg, Richard Brake, Melora Walters**

SHUDDER Cult items such as *Messiah Of Evil* and *Tourist Trap* spring to mind when watching the prolific Mickey Keating's latest indie horror.

It's set, for the most part, in the island town Lone Palm (in reality, Florida's New Smyrna Beach), whose economy is so seasonal it closes completely to outsiders for much of the year. And you don't want to be stuck there when the bridge to the mainland is raised... Jocelin Donahue is Marie, who's called there – with partner George in tow – after her mother's gravestone is vandalised.

Familiar horror tropes soon pile up, to the point where they may prompt a wry chuckle. Pupils turn white; fallen trees block the road; hands suddenly grasp shoulders. There's even a scene where a bar full of locals stop and turn to stare menacingly at the out-of-towners. And the plotting isn't anything to write home about, with periodic exposition dumps moving the story forward.

Where Keating succeeds is in conjuring an ominous, surreal atmosphere. Painted in bleak greys and blues, Lone Palm is, with its deserted beach and misty cemetery, an oppressively gloomy, Lovecraftian realm. And the *Shining*-style use of swoonsome big band numbers (or at least, library music approximations...) consolidates the nightmarish mood very effectively. **Ian Berriman**



Just an average day in the *SFX* office.

LUMINOUS PROCURESS

Hippy hardcore

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1971 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Steven Arnold**

Cast **Pandora, Steve Solberg, Ronald Farrell, Doro Franco**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The blurb** describes this surreal product of the Haight-Ashbury underground scene as "a phantasmagorical journey towards spiritual ecstasy", but "a bunch of hippies titting about" also covers it.

In the vein of Kenneth Anger and Federico Fellini, it sees two pretty young men led through a series of strange pansexual tableaux by the fabulously bewigged Procuress. Expect much festival face-paint, extravagant "hair creations" (as the credit goes), and many flaccid schlongs.

There's no dialogue (barring mumbled gibberish) and the camera operator's approach is generally just to randomly roam around the happening. One moment you're watching full-on penetrative sex; the next, an avant-garde drag troupe (the amusingly-named Cockettes) are doing their best come-hither looks. Our favourite: the bearded Carmen Miranda-type caressing his pineapple breasts.

There's the occasional striking image, but even liberally minded viewers may find themselves thinking that everyone involved would have benefitted from a haircut, a wash and a proper job.

⊕ **Extras** The producer discusses the film's origins (nine minutes); a curator discusses its history in a screening intro (21 minutes). Plus: booklet. **Calvin Baxter**

i Salvador Dali was so impressed that he invited director Steven Arnold to help build the Dali Museum in Figueres.

DEMONIA

Twisted Sisters

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1990 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Lucio Fulci**

Cast **Brett Halsey, Meg Register, Lino Salemme, Christina Englehardt**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Lucio Fulci's 50th** film is one for completist fans only, thanks to a Gothic horror plot that feels like it's running on tracks.

In 1486, five nuns accused of consorting with Satan are crucified. In the modern day, a student on an archaeological dig uncovers the crypt where it happened. Crushingly literal dreams, campfire-singalong padding and many, many camera zooms follow. The surreal touches that are the hallmark of the director's best work are absent. Okay, a crucified nun materialises naked packing a harpoon gun, but that's just *stupid*.

Two things linger in the mind: location work in the scenic ruins of a Sicilian church, and the set-piece kills. But the latter are memorable for their ropiness: a woman is blinded by cats that are obviously stuffed; a man torn in half has a torso with two differing flesh tones. Not Fulci's finest hour.

⊕ **Extras** A freewheeling 84-minute interview with the late director dates from 1995. Lacking clips or narration, it may frustrate if you don't know his work inside out. The questions get oddball, and Fulci responds with witty pronouncements ("I regard myself as a kind of accumulation of incoherence") and many literary references. You get a strong sense of his eccentric personality.

> **"The surreal touches of Fulci's best work are absent"**



Never tell a nun the "Where's the soap?" joke.

Fulci expert Stephen Thrower's commentary is well-informed and wryly humorous, drawing on his own interviews. Eleven minutes of on-set VHS includes someone yellling, "Don't breathe, ladies!" at the dead nuns. Cameraman Sandro Grossi (15 minutes) and AD Antonio Tentori (33 minutes) both speak; ironically, the former thinks Fulci, with his fondness for the fog filter, would have *hated* HD.

Plus: more on-set footage (five minutes); a trailer and gallery for the doc; movie trailer; art cards; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i Asked about all the scenes of eye damage in his films, Fulci claims that they are "a tribute to [French writer] Apollinaire".

ZONE TROOPERS

The Great Escape

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 20 JUNE

1985 | 12 | Blu-ray

Director **Danny Bilson**

Cast **Tim Thomerson, Timothy Van Patten, Art LaFleur, Biff Manard**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Ignore the** meaninglessly vague title. Don't be misled by the poster, with its UFOs zapping GIs. And don't be put off by the credit for producer Charles Band, as this is (like *Trancers*, which featured three of the same cast) one of the few Band productions worth your time.

Set in Italy in 1944, it follows three US soldiers and a reporter, sole survivors of a German attack on their unit. Lost behind enemy lines, they find an SS camp, the remains of a crashed spaceship, and a weird alien on the loose.

Written by *Trancers*' Danny Bilson and Paul De Meo, who went on to bigger things with *The Rocketeer*, this wryly humorous pulp-comic adventure mashes-up '50s and '60s war movies with *ET*. The heroes are likeably individualised, and despite a $500,000 budget, the production values are pretty decent. The script has plenty of quirky wit, from a scene where the Führer gets socked in the kisser, to the alien's penchant for scoffing cigarettes. This irreverence extends to the score, which places big band music over action scenes and shamelessly rehashes *Star Wars*' Imperial March for its Nazi theme.

With its "Schnell!"-yelling Germans, who attack closely-bunched, it makes the Second World War seem good fun. Anyone who played "army" as a kid and supplied their own machine-gun noises should be charmed.



"It seems to be powered by a gigantic shirt button."

⊕ **Extras** A 34-minute Making Of, pieced together from Zoom calls, quizzes Band, writer/director Danny Bilson, the editor, and the composer; it addresses Bilson's gripes, but Band doesn't remember any disputes. A 13-minute director interview covers much of the same ground, but does include a deleted scene. You also get a Kim Newman talking head (10 minutes), and a chatty commentary which spends 31 minutes discussing other Charles Band movies before remembering the one that's playing in the background... Plus: trailer; an extensive gallery, including the director's own on-set snaps; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i On location, all four of the principle cast had to share the same motorhome. Apparently, the toilet was horrendous...

THE INITIATION OF SARAH

Taking the pledge

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 20 JUNE

1978 | TBC | Blu-ray

Director **Robert Day**

Cast **Kay Lenz, Tony Bill, Kathryn Grant, Morgan Fairchild**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **It's good to see an** old TV movie get a with-knobs-on HD revival, but there are better candidates than this half-baked sorority shocker.

Riffing heavily on *Carrie*, it follows Cinders-esque fresher Sarah (Kay Lenz), who's bullied by the mean girls of Alpha Nu Sigma (amusingly, their leader is called Jennifer Lawrence). Sarah has telekinetic powers, but doesn't use them for much worse than tipping people into ornamental ponds.

Featuring more feathercuts than a *Charlie's Angels* box set, it's best appreciated as an exercise in high camp: there are insults as stinging as a paper cut; some "wizened hag" make-up is hilariously poor; and Shelley Winters's handsy "magical practices" professor is... well, Shelley Winters.

It all ends in a conflagration in a hedge maze (was Stephen King watching? Probably not)... and utter confusion. Winters's Satanic house mother doesn't really have a comprehensible plan, and a key mystery is simply left hanging. Now, can we have *Crowhaven Farm* and *Killdozer* next, please?

⊕ **Extras** The curse of the video essay strikes, in triplicate. The first (17 minutes) shrieks about how terribly camp it all is – yes dear, we have eyes. A second (15 minutes) intellectualises on how the film reflects the advent of second-wave feminism (hmm...). A third, er, explains what a TV movie is (16 minutes). In the absence of production documentation, TV movies expert Amanda Reyes does her best on the commentary, firing off biographies in motormouth style. Interviewed, *Fright Night*'s Tom Holland (nine minutes) reveals that in his original treatment the snobs were turned into barnyard animals! Plus: the ropiest stills gallery you've ever seen; booklet.

Ian Berriman



Kay Lenz was once in a Rod Stewart video. FACT.

i Morgan Fairchild agreed to a shower scene on the understanding she'd be in a body stocking, but was pushed to do it topless.



The Assassin, frankly not being very sneaky.

MAD GOD

Down, down, deeper and down

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2022 | TBC | SVOD

Director **Phil Tippett**

SHUDDER **Few films have had a** gestation quite as protracted as this one. Hollywood effects supervisor Phil Tippett began filming in 1987 while working on *RoboCop 2*, then shelved it for 20 years. With the aid of volunteers and Kickstarter donations, it's now finally been completed.

Told chiefly through stop-motion, with occasional live-action intrusions (*Moviedrome* fans will be amused when Alex Cox turns up), it begins with a pod being lowered on a cable through numerous subterranean levels, then follows its occupant, a gas-masked figure credited as The Assassin. There's no dialogue to speak of, beyond grunts and eerie baby cries, and a storyline is difficult to apprehend.

More Hieronymous Bosch than Ray Harryhausen, this journey through a hellish underworld coheres mainly due to its recurring visual elements – skulls, chains, ruins, clocks, eyeballs, cancerous growth – and disturbing themes: torture, enslavement, bodily pulverisation, predation.

Let go of the desire for a comprehensible narrative, and you can appreciate the achievement. Tippett's nightmarish tableaux, largely assembled from junk and covered in grot and grime, are incredibly busy, bristling with a level of detail which should reward repeat viewings. An engrossingly grotesque Grand Guignol spectacle. **Ian Berriman**

i Look out for a cameo by Robby the Robot about nine minutes 45 seconds in. Well, a battered toy version, anyway...



GATLOPP: HELL OF A GAME

★★★★☆

RELEASED 27 JUNE

2022 | TBC | Download

Gatlopp purports to be a Swedish drinking game, but when recently divorced Paul and his college friends play, things descend into supernatural chaos. And if no-one wins by dawn? Then they're all doomed.

Solid performances all round bring the dramas between the group to life: it's rare for horror movie friends to feel like actual friends. Short and genuinely sweet, this is a perfect ode to keeping your pals close – and your ex-wife closer. **Sarah Dobbs**



REVEALER

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED 23 JUNE

2022 | TBC | SVOD

SHUDDER **It's secrets, rather** than skin, that get revealed when a stripper and a religious fanatic get trapped in an '80s peep show during the apocalypse. (Okay, there's a little skin too.)

Thanks to strict Covid-19 protocols, this is mostly a film about two women chatting, with occasional rubber monster interludes. The script could've done with a few more rounds of edits, as the conversation tends to go round in circles and insight is thin on the ground. Still, the rubber monsters are great. **Sarah Dobbs**



THE CORPSE CAN'T PLAY

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1968 | 18 | DVD

Hats off to all involved in resurrecting this sole surviving episode of anthology show *Late Night Horror*, now lovingly restored to colour. However, there's not much to this slight tale of a kids' birthday party, beyond its time-capsule appeal and the morbid pay-off – even the central disturbed child isn't especially creepy.

Extras An informative 100+ page book on the series is the best reason to fork out £24. Plus: B&W footage; trailer; restoration info. **Ian Berriman**



CURSE OF THE VOODOO

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ☆☆☆☆☆

RELEASED 4 JULY

1965 | PG | DVD

This clumsily titled vintage chiller finds a big-game hunter bagging a lion, incurring the curse of the tribe that worships the beast as a god.

Shot in black and white, it's a clipped, sober British horror complete with Pathé News-style plummy voiceover. Visions of spear-waving tribesmen in misty English parkland approach *Avengers*-style surrealism – Brian Clemens pseudonymously wrote the screenplay, in fact.

Extras None. **Nick Setchfield**



Bets on who's going to be offed first, if you please.

X

The Texas Porn Star Massacre

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★☆☆☆

RELEASED 20 JUNE

2022 | 18 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

Director **Ti West**

Cast **Mia Goth, Jenna Ortega, Kid Cudi, Brittany Snow**

Ti West's first feature in six years is a stylish, cine-literate slasher. It's 1979 and the adult VHS business is booming (or rather banging). Sensing an opportunity to make money, sleazy producer Wayne (Martin Henderson), starlet Maxine Minx (Mia Goth) and friends head into the country to shoot a sex film. They've rented an isolated farm, but haven't reckoned on a deadly run-in with the elderly owners...

West joins the dots between two outsider genres – horror and porn – in a way that's neither prurient nor prudish, with skilfully drawn characters and strong performances. The young stars of film-within-a-film *The Farmer's Daughters* are a bunch of misfits, but most of them are fairly likeable. Goth is particularly impressive, pulling double-duty as both the old-beyond-her-years Maxine and – plastered in impressive prosthetics – the eerie OAP Pearl.

X isn't going to surprise you much. You've seen this story before, and the only real question is which – if any – of these characters will make it to the end. Still, it's a delicious reminder of the simple pleasures of a well-executed slasher.

Extras A standard 11-minute Making Of, plus an extended edit of the film-within-a-film footage (five minutes). **Will Salmon**

i The film was shot in Whanganui, New Zealand, not Texas, with the farm's barn and bunkhouse built by the production.

THE WITCH

SFX Loves

Goat Whisperer

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2015 | 15 | 4K Blu-ray

Director **Robert Eggers**

Cast **Anya Taylor-Joy, Ralph Ineson, Kate Dickie, Harvey Scrimshaw**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **This folk horror** nightmare made a star of the young Anya Taylor-Joy and marked out director Robert Eggers as an exciting new talent with a fastidious eye for detail.

William (Ralph Ineson) and his family of settlers must go it alone in the wilds of 17th century New England – a land fraught with dangers both physical and, perhaps, supernatural. When baby Samuel goes missing, eldest daughter Thomasin (Taylor-Joy) comes under suspicion of consorting with the Devil.

The Witch is an uncompromising look at the hell of life under Puritanism. There might be dark forces frolicking in the woods, and there's definitely something up with Black Phillip – the family's almost comically ominous goat – but the real evil here is religious dogma, misogyny and human cruelty. Eggers conjures an atmosphere of dread and mounting hysteria which builds to a finale that's both ambiguous and – ultimately – weirdly cathartic.

Extras Eggers's commentary from the previous release is ported over, and accompanied by a track from critic Anna Bogutskaya. A new interview with the director (27 minutes) goes in-depth on his journey towards making the film. Most of the core cast also provide interviews, and it's clear that *The Witch* remains an important milestone for all of them. It was a breakout role for Taylor-Joy (14 minutes) and Harvey Scrimshaw (seven minutes), who played Caleb. We also learn that it was a career highlight for Ineson (21 minutes), despite the fact it sent him to the ER three times, while Kate Dickie (15 minutes) relished the historical accuracy. A BFI interview (11 minutes) and a short behind-the-scenes piece (nine minutes) add further insight.

Most interesting is *Brothers* (11 minutes) – an atmospheric short about two boys out in the woods Eggers made to drum up support. This Special Edition comes with a 150-page book and six art cards. There are 4K and Blu-ray discs for both film and bonuses. **Will Salmon**



Best not go down to the woods today, Anya.

i Charlie, the goat that played Black Phillip, took a dislike to Ralph Ineson, repeatedly injuring him during the shoot.



THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 20 JUNE

1972 | 15 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)/DVD/download

Directors **Luis Buñuel**

Cast **Fernando Rey, Paul Frankeur, Delphine Seyrig, Bulle Ogier**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **It's a scenario** especially likely to horrify the French: a group of well-heeled friends repeatedly try to enjoy a meal together but are frustrated by obstacles, from intrusions by gunmen or the police to the revelation that the dining room is part of a play. Repetition and non-sequiturs abound; often it all turns out to be a dream. The surreal air is bolstered by accounts of dreams featuring encounters with the dead.

At times, the film skirts Ray Cooney farce, and while director Luis Buñuel skewers his establishment types – who may have an immaculate facade but are snobbish and corrupt – by his iconoclastic standards it all seems rather mild. Which no doubt explains why it bagged him his only Oscar.

⊕ **Extras** A 2012 interview with Bunuel's co-writer Jean-Claude Carrière (24 minutes) has good insights into their working relationship. Also carried over is a useful talking head by an academic (34 minutes). The new bonuses feature French critic Charles Tesson. An interview (31 minutes) covers similar ground to the first prof, while "analysis" of three scenes (20 minutes) is full of eyeroll-worthy remarks like "They sit down..." – Arnie's commentary on *Total Recall* springs to mind. Plus: two trailers. **Ian Berriman**



James Woods can even win a staring contest with a cat.

CAT'S EYE

Three Kings

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1985 | 15 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)/DVD/download

Director **Lewis Teague**

Cast **James Woods, Robert Hays, Drew Barrymore**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Tenuously linked** by a roving tabby, this Stephen King anthology stitches two tales from his *Night Shift* collection to a third, newly written segment. A smoker (James Woods) gets more than he bargained for from a firm that helps you quit. A gangster forces his wife's lover (Robert Hays) to walk around a building on a 5"-wide ledge. Finally, a tiny, teethy troll menaces a young girl (Drew Barrymore).

With their ironic pay-offs and lack of a supernatural element, the *Night Shift* segments feel more like *Tales Of The Unexpected*. The stand-out story? It's a toss-up between the first, which showcases Woods's comedy chops, and the third, purely for its *Land Of The Giants*-style outsized props.

> **"Second-best to Creepshow, but should still please King fans"**

Tongue-in-cheek rather than chilling, *Cat's Eye* is second-best compared to *Creepshow*, but should still please King fans, especially those who enjoy Easter eggs – there are cameos by Cujo and Christine, and a character declares "Who writes this crap?" while watching *The Dead Zone*. Moggy lovers, meanwhile, will be *seriously* impressed by the quality of the cat-wrangling.

⊕ **Extras** After 150 man-hours spent removing dirt, the print is clean as a whistle. A commentary by Lewis Teague, recorded in 2002, has a few pauses, but is worth a listen. Interviews with Robert Hays (28 minutes) and animal trainer Teresa Ann Miller (eight minutes) date from 2017; Hays recalls working in pain, having cracked a rib. The one new bonus is a decent director interview (12 minutes). Sadly, there's no sign of a prologue, shot by Teague but rejected by execs, mentioned therein. Plus: trailer. **Ian Berriman**

ⓘ The scene where a pigeon pecks at Robert Hays's foot was achieved by first training the bird to eat seed from a hole in a boot.

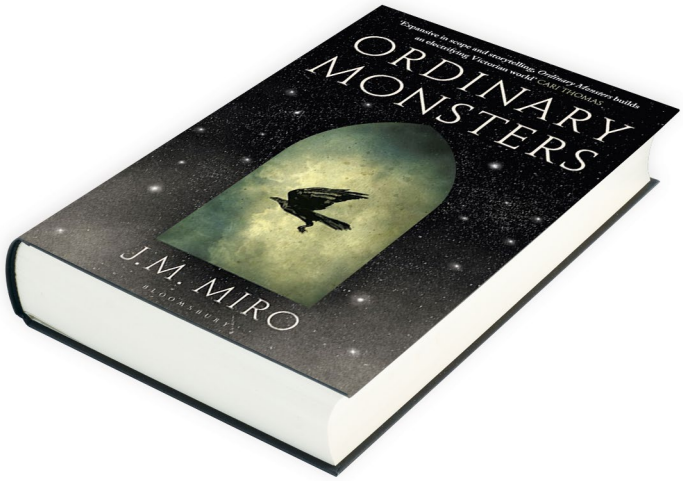
(ROUND UP)



The comic on which **ULTRASOUND** (20 June, download) is based is reviewed on page 93. The film (scripted by the same writer) is faithful, but prunes away sproutings of flashbacks, making this tale of a research project into auditory hypnotism much more of a straight thriller. Key questions are also spelled out in a way which makes everything more easily apprehensible. Both versions have their strengths, though the movie feels rather enclosed; at times, you may suspect they're shooting in someone's box room. A maverick cop fights vampire tramps on the streets of LA in **CHUCK STEEL: NIGHT OF THE TRAMPIRES** (out now, Blu-ray), a stop-motion homage to '80s action flicks with some grindhouse sleaze thrown in. We said: "It's demented fun, but outstays its welcome, with the last third pretty much repeated gags and endless blowing up of big squelchy things."

In Canadian movie **THE RETREAT** (4 July, DVD), a lesbian couple head to a rental cottage, only to be abducted by homophobic hicks with a plan to livestream their murder. Ticking off most of the clichés on the survival horror bingo card, it is, barring a death by CRT monitor and the opportunity for gay viewers to see vengeance enacted in a way which might feel especially satisfying for them, not particularly noteworthy.

Finally, the latest TV box sets include **NOUGHTS & CROSSES SERIES TWO** (out now, DVD), **RAISED BY WOLVES SEASON ONE** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD) and **THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY SEASON TWO** (27 June, Blu-ray/DVD).



ORDINARY MONSTERS

SFX Loves

Hidden talents

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

672 pages | **Hardback/ebook**

Author **JM Miro**

Publisher **Bloomsbury**

JM Miro's *Ordinary Monsters,* book one of new series The Talents, might just be the fantasy debut of the year – although technically it's the pseudonymous work of established Canadian novelist and poet Steven Price, who's taking his first plunge into genre fiction.

The tale begins with a runaway girl finding a glowing baby next to a body in a train boxcar, blossoming outwards from there to pull in a Scottish school for people with extraordinary talents, a portal between worlds, and a man shrouded in shadows who is hunting for a missing boy.

This continent- and dimension-hopping adventure pulls in a large cast, including Charlie Ovid, a black teenager convicted of killing a white man in Mississippi, who proves impossible to execute because he miraculously heals from any injury. He's found by private detective Alice Quicke, who's been hired to gather remarkable children for Henry Berghast, director of the Cairndale Institute, a home for those with special abilities. Quicke is in a race against former Cairndale employee Jacob Marber, who is now intent on destroying Berghast, to find Marlowe, the glowing boy.

Miro gives them all vivid inner lives, making the villains just as intriguing as the protagonists. Marber first appears as a manifestation of darkness and purest malice, yet his backstory adds complexity and even the possibility of empathy to the character, while his motivations only become truly clear as the tale unfolds. The range of talents, meanwhile, spans everything from healing and invisibility to truly uncanny and macabre abilities like that of Oskar, a boy who's accompanied everywhere by a golem made of decaying flesh.

The story spans the fog-shrouded streets and filthy sewers of Victorian London, chilly Edinburgh, the smothering heat of the American South, and humid Japan, all evoked with tangible clarity. Miro keeps all the plot threads running concurrently without letting them become tangled. The prose is superb, evoking a creeping dread in the unnatural presence of Marber, while action scenes are startling in their violent intensity – particularly a terrifying battle onboard a train and the final, desperate showdown.

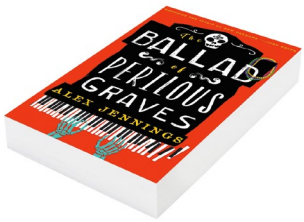
There's little sense of security in this novel. Characters can be sympathetic, with engaging plot arcs of their own, and still fall prey to Marber and his acolytes. Every encounter between the two sides takes its toll, keeping the reader on edge. Miro's heroes are women and children, whose vulnerability makes their bravery and sacrifices in the face of evil irresistibly compelling while adding extra dimensions to the conflict.

Miro's storytelling exudes confidence and assurance, while his influences are readily divided. The unsettling descriptions of how horror disrupts everything around it are reminiscent of Stephen King. The travel between worlds and strength and resolve of the children recalls Phillip Pullman. The gathering of remarkable people and Victorian setting bring to mind Alan Moore. And the school for those with remarkable abilities feels like a tip of the hat to Chris Claremont's classic run on *X-Men*.

> **"Action scenes are startling in their violent intensity"**

Yet the book doesn't feel derivative or familiar, thanks to the vibrancy of the writing and characters, combined with a plot that twists down unexpected avenues. *Ordinary Monsters* is a thrilling blend of fantasy and horror, richly imagined and masterfully executed. **David West**

i The hideous drughr in *Ordinary Monsters* could be named after the Viking legends of undead creatures imbued with evil.



THE BALLAD OF PERILOUS GRAVES

★★★★☆

RELEASED **23 JUNE**

464 pages | **Paperback/ebook**

Author **Alex Jennings**

Publisher **Orbit Books**

Some stories are just too big for a single book to contain. When an author has effectively invented a whole world (or substantially reworked an existing one), you can hardly blame them for wanting to share as much of it as they can.

Alex Jennings's debut is a vibrant, fantastical love letter to New Orleans: its community, its history and above all its musical soul. In this alternate "Nola", there are zombies, sky trolleys (air trams), and a travelling jazz cafe that appears only for artists. Graffiti drifts off walls, and a musician spirit called Doctor Professor materialises at random to launch impromptu dance parties. When nine songs from Doctor Professor's repertoire are stolen, schoolkids Perilous (Perry) Graves and his sister Brendy find themselves on the front line of a magical war to save the city.

It's partly a coming of age tale, in which the anxious Perry must grow to trust his own power (snarky, sparky Brendy has no such doubts). It's partly about intergenerational injustice and the cyclical dangers faced down by a largely black community in the US south; Hurricane Katrina looms large. It's also entirely unruly, packed with more imagination and energy than you'd find in three other novels. It doesn't always hold together, but it's hugely infectious fun.

Nic Clarke



THE KNAVE OF SECRETS

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
400 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Alex Livingston**
Publisher **Solaris Books**

Characters exclaim "Bof!" and wear powdered wigs in this epic French fancy. It's the story of card-sharp Valen Quinol and his gang of swindlers. They thrive undercover in the city of Saut-Leronne, which has an imperial Gallic style to it. A local gangster threatens them into ripping off a high-stakes card game where secrets are the prizes. The caper's a success and they swipe the prize, but discover it's worth far more than they expected – a secret politicians and spies will kill for. There's a sorcerous twist, too: enchantments and divinations are among the weapons used by both crooks and diplomats.

While the gangland shenanigans of *The Knave Of Secrets* bring to mind recent roguish romances like *Priest Of Bones* or *The Moonsteel Crown*, the French twist and an obsession with the lore of the card table make this unique. If anything, there's a touch too much world-building – it feels like the author has spent as much time documenting the rules of new gambling formats as composing the story. This background material is woven into the narrative confidently, but occasionally characters are forced to drop some exposition.

But overall, this is an innovative, fresh tale. It feels like *Ocean's Eleven* in 18th century France meets a magical *Casino Royale*. **Dave Bradley**



THE PATH OF THORNS

That'll learn 'em

★★★★☆

RELEASED 28 JUNE
352 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **AG Slatter**
Publisher **Titan Books**

From *Jane Eyre* to *The Turn Of The Screw*, governesses equal disruption. Not quite servants, not quite family, unmarried yet responsible for educating children, they break up the social order. In many historical novels they're actually blameless; that can't be said of Asher Todd, who's not even a trained governess, and takes up her place at isolated Morwood Grange with the intention of overturning a great many things.

There's plenty of scope for horror, but while the story includes more than one ghost and several murders, it never slips over into being outright shocking. Instead, AG Slatter draws out tension as Asher works her way into the lives of the family, the other servants, and even the residents of a nearby village.

In classic gothic fashion, many of the characters (the worst ones in particular), are exaggerated; paterfamilias Luther Morwood in particular embodies most of the least appealing qualities of a Victorian villain, from a tendency to seduce his female servants to mistreatment of his fragile wife, while his elderly mother, conniving and vain, shows herself to be no better.

> **"The story never slips over into being outright shocking"**

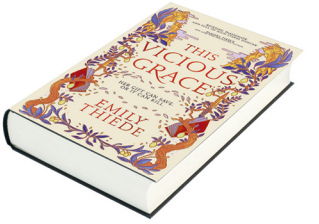
But this is balanced out by the children, a number of the minor characters and Asher herself, who all feel very human in their reactions to events, and whom you can sympathise with even when they're being downright unpleasant to each other.

This is an outright fantasy. Asher's a witch in a world where that could get her burned, and magic is real. Yet the narrative isn't centred on magic, but rather on the wrongs people do each other and the harm abusive families can do.

As Asher heals the locals she heals her own unseen wounds; as she ensures Morwood Grange's future lies with the kind rather than the cruel, she also frees herself from past mistreatment. The result is an absorbing, captivating tale.

Miriam McDonald

i This novel takes place in the same world as *Sourdough*, Slatter's World Fantasy Award-nominated book of fairy tales.



THIS VICIOUS GRACE

★★★½☆

RELEASED 28 JUNE
448 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Emily Thiede**
Publisher **Hodder & Stoughton**

Generally speaking, calling someone a window isn't particularly complimentary. But for Alessa, becoming her island's "Finestra" is both a blessing and a curse.

Magically endowed with the ability to take and magnify a person's energy by touching them, she – alongside a similarly gifted "Fonte" – is tasked with fighting the swarm of ginormous bug demons sent once per generation by the God of Chaos. Poor old Alessa, though, got an extra strong dose of superpowers, and anyone she touches dies. Three dead Fontes in and her people are losing faith, so she hires street fighter Dante to protect her... only to find he's got secret powers of his own.

The complex and colourful world of the Finestra is delightfully rendered, all secret passages, religious fanatics and lemon-scented hot springs. The range of powers the different potential Fontes wield is more than a little reminiscent of the X-Men – and yes, Alessa is basically Rogue, with Dante her very own Wolverine – but keeping the story locked into Alessa's lonely perspective keeps the focus on emotions, not action.

Not completely original, then, but *This Vicious Grace* is still compulsively readable. It's especially recommended for fans of star-crossed romance. **Sarah Dobbs**

Reviews



SILK FIRE

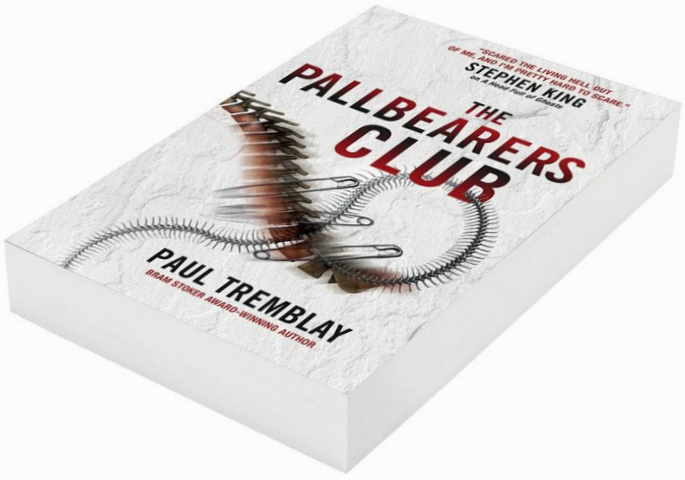
★★★½☆

RELEASED 7 JULY
475 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Zabé Ellor**
Publisher **Solaris Books**

This novel is more interesting for its setting, Jadzia, a city the size of a planet, than its story. Split into sectors, each dedicated to a different now-dead god, with its own language and prioritising of a different skill, it's a fascinating place.

The bulk of the book's set in War, where the idea of people living in monumental sculptures hundreds of storeys tall, each owned by a single person, fires the imagination. The brothel The High Kiss, owned by protagonist Koré, is literally in the head of a titanic statue of a kneeling man. Our world's gender norms are inverted there; women are the leaders and lawmakers, men expected to be gentle and loving. This inversion is not hammered home with authorial comment – Zabé Ellor clearly trusts readers to think about what the characters accept as the norm for themselves.

As distinctive as the world is, most of the characters aren't particularly complex, and the plot's not dissimilar to a lot of fantasy fare. Koré is an illegitimate child who's worked his way into a position to take his revenge on the wealthy, high-status father who seduced and abandoned his mother. He's the owner of a high-class brothel when the novel starts; and there is a lot of sex in the book – it's all consensual, but if you like such things heretosexual and vanilla, this will not be the story for you. **Miriam McDonald**



THE PALLBEARERS CLUB

A work of Art

★★★★☆

RELEASED 5 JULY
400 pages | Paperback/ebook/ audiobook
Author **Paul Tremblay**
Publisher **Titan Books**

Nope, not a bleak sticky- carpeted drinking hole for post-funeral sorrow-drowning. The Pallbearers Club is, improbably, an extracurricular activity invented by awkward teen Art Barbara: sweetly, if morbidly, the club helps out at a local funeral parlour when the deceased doesn't have many friends or family to lay them to rest. Art only ever intended to boost his CV, but through the club he meets Mercy (not her real name), who may or may not be a vampire.

Paul Tremblay's latest sideways take on horror is presented as a memoir, of sorts. The main text is Art's: he spent years writing and rewriting an account of his life in an effort to sort out when and how Mercy's evil influence might have soured his prospects. But after his death, Mercy has claimed the manuscript and scribbled her side of the story in the margins.

The book's one flaw is that Art's writing style is (intentionally) pretty unbearable, particularly his Whedonesque tendency to use nouns as verbs. He describes things variously as "werewolfing", "iceberging", "salmoning", "lighthousing" and more. Individually, it's a harmless creative quirk, but over the chapters the cumulative effect really reduces any sympathy the reader might have felt for Art's predicament. Having Mercy snarkily point out the most insufferable parts only makes her more likeable... unless, of course, Art's creative shortcomings are all her fault?

The interplay between two wildly unreliable narrators makes for a fun read, and Tremblay weaves in the tragic true story of Mercy Brown and the New England vampire panic for even more ambiguity. Maybe there aren't quite as many metatextual layers as in his earlier novel *A Head Full Of Ghosts*, but it's not far off. **Sarah Dobbs**

i Lucy Westenra in *Dracula* is thought to be based on Mercy Brown, who was exhumed and burned for vampirism in 1892.



TOGETHER WE BURN

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 5 JULY
400 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Isabel Ibañez**
Publisher **Titan Books**

Zarela used to have it all. The daughter of a famed flamenco dancer and a renowned dragonador (dragon fighter) and heir to the La Giralda dragonfighting arena, performance and tradition have always been her life. But her mother was killed by a dragon a year ago, and now, after a fight was sabotaged, escaped dragons have left her father near death and their business disgraced. With little money or reputation left, the only solution she sees is to enter the ring herself, persuading a dragon tamer to train her to fight before her family loses everything.

It's an interesting concept – bullfighting reimagined as dragonfighting in a Spanish-inspired fantasy world – that's unfortunately badly realised. It's difficult to feel much sympathy for Zarela, despite her losses, as she blindly places her family's pride above all else. The death of innocents is sad, it seems, but never quite so awful as the prospect of losing her name and the family business.

Nor does Arturo, the trainer, get any say in his affairs once she's determined that he is needed to help her. It's a stubbornness that's presented as attractive but unfortunately reads more as selfishness. The romance, once it gets going, is compelling if clichéd, but some sensual moments can't make up for an unlikeable lead and an ending that's altogether too neat. **Rhian Drinkwater**



THE SPLENDID CITY

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

261 pages | Paperback/ebook

Author **Karen Heuler**

Publisher **Angry Robot**

As the cost of living crisis accelerates in the real world, *The Splendid City* is very timely: a story set in Liberty, a country formed after Texas secedes from the USA, where water is rationed and the shortages always blamed on someone else, while the President distracts the population with random giveaways and cheap nougats. Two newcomers – Eleanor, a white witch, and Stan, a talking cat, who live together in spite of clearly not getting on – try to understand how this place works.

There's a peculiar clash of ideas here – the existence of witchcraft in a modern-day setting on top of this heightened political and social satire – and at times they don't feel entirely comfortable co-existing in the same book. Yet Karen Heuler's willingness to throw in such ideas, in direct and clear-eyed prose, is what gives the novel its distinctive sensibility. This is mostly the world we're familiar with – geographical and cultural references make this clear – but it's only taken a slight push to make it quite odd.

As the narrative unfolds, and Eleanor and Stan's recent history is filled in, it becomes clear how the seemingly disparate elements connect, even if the denouement feels slightly hurried. It's a novel that weaves its own logic and ends up making a lot of sense.

Eddie Robson



THE SEAWOMEN

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

320 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook

Author **Chloe Timms**

Publisher **Hodder Studio**

In Chloe Timms's debut, women accused of witchery aren't burnt at the stake, but ritually drowned. The element changes, but society's compulsion to punish women remains the same.

Esta is an orphan living in a remote island community, raised by the church and taught to believe that her gender is a curse. She prepares herself for a life of meek servitude as a wife and mother – until she meets a boy in the sea who has scales for skin.

While this sounds like an inversion of *The Little Mermaid*, Timms isn't interested in writing a cutesy love story. Instead she unmasks organised religion as a gleaming façade for misogynistic cults, and explores how easily whispered rumours can spiral into mass hysteria.

Bonus points for her shockingly nasty villain, Father Jessop, the priest who puts innocent little girls on a pedestal but tortures and drowns any woman who dares to think for herself.

It's just a shame that *The Seawomen* lacks its own identity. Does it want to be a modern retelling of *The Crucible*? Does it want to be *The Handmaid's Tale* with mer-people? Does it want to explore how folklore can be weaponised to control isolated communities à la *The Village*? Unmoored, it drifts, and so does our enjoyment.

Kimberley Ballard



IN THE HEART OF HIDDEN THINGS

★★★½☆

RELEASED 23 JUNE

409 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook

Author **Kit Whitfield**

Publisher **Jo Fletcher Books**

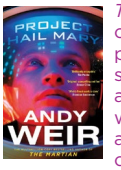
The strange is mundane in this fairy tale – and that's not a negative point. Kit Whitfield's vaguely 18th-century magical realist world is one where "fairy-smiths" are called upon to deal with problems with the fey, whether that's fairly minor ones like badly behaved bushes, talking cats or investigating deaths at the jaws of Black Hal, the spectral hound that runs down Chalk Lane seven times a year. But their real problems are grasping landlords squeezing other villagers, threatening eviction and worse.

As the Smiths – Jedediah, Matthew and adolescent, slightly fey-touched John – try to help those around them and stand up to Ephraim Brady and Roger Groves, the book makes a beautiful exploration of masculinity, of what it means to be physically strong and potentially have control over others, and how a person accepts responsibility.

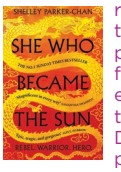
The narrative is simple. While characters' minor human failings (daydreaming, curiosity, inability to express themselves) are treated gently by both the narrator and the other characters, it's clear from the start who's good and who's bad. Perhaps in that respect the story's a little too plain, though as you get to know the Smiths and the people around them, you'll be hoping that everyone who deserves a fairy tale ending gets one. **Miriam McDonald**

REISSUES

This month's big paperback is Andy Weir's latest, **PROJECT HAIL MARY** (★★★★☆, out now, Del Rey). The author of



The Martian once again puts the sci in sci-fi here, as a scientist wakes up on an interstellar craft, discovering that he's the last surviving member of a mission to save the Earth from global cooling due to a micro-organism that's draining the Sun's energy. Luckily, he soon has the help of an alien... We said: "Weir makes the plight of his protagonists just as propulsive as the impending armageddon back home – science and fiction in near-perfect harmony." Shelley Parker-Chan's historical fantasy **SHE WHO BECAME THE SUN** (★★★★☆, out now, Pan)

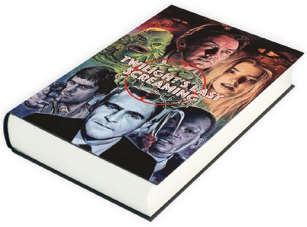


reimagines the rise to power of the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty, putting a girl disguised as a boy in place of the real-life Zhu Yuanzhang. The fantasy elements are kept to a minimum: some characters can see ghosts, and rulers light up with a coloured fire that reveals their right to do so. We said: "If you enjoy the zero-to-hero aspect of genre fantasy and the setting of Imperial China, it's a winner." Finally, James Han Mattson's **REPRIEVE** (★★★★☆ 7 July, Bloomsbury)



puts a horror spin on the escape room phenomenon, as four contestants team up to take on six terrifying challenges and win a huge cash prize. Yes, someone's going to end up dead... We said: "Real world issues of racism, capitalism and misogyny simmer unnervingly throughout.... A smart, troubling book."

Reviews



TWILIGHT'S LAST SCREAMING

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

668 pages | Hardback

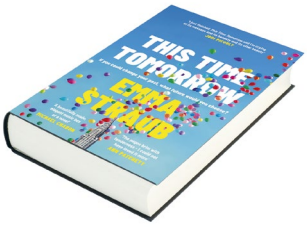
Author **Sean Hogan**

Publisher **Black Shuck Books**

In *England's Screaming*, Sean Hogan transformed his collection of cult British DVDs into a literary universe, penning short story pseudo-sequels to horror films both well-known (*The Wicker Man*) and obscure (*The Appointment*), placing them within a larger narrative, with crossovers aplenty.

In this direct sequel, Hogan transposes his overarching Satanic story to America, writing an alternate history not just of the country, but of cinema itself (*The Witch* and *Ravenous* are now boundary-pushing prequels to completely different films). Following the events of *England's Screaming*, Damien Thorn is back, ready to conquer the New World. But can some of cinema's most notorious star-spangled characters stop (or aid) him?

Idiosyncratic focal choices give the book an unpredictable feel, as do some controversial elements. Jesse Hooker from *Near Dark* drops the n-word multiple times, and some of these stories are taken in such bizarre directions that we can't help but wonder how the actual creators would feel; even Roman Polanski might balk at Rosemary giving her child a hand-job... Still, an author who takes on characters by Stephen King, Bret Easton Ellis and Cormac McCarthy probably isn't too fussed about what people think of him. A brave book, but one with limited appeal, then. **Sam Ashurst**



THIS TIME TOMORROW

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

304 pages | Hardback/ ebook/audiobook

Author **Emma Straub**

Publisher **Michael Joseph**

Life is full of what-ifs and if-onlys, and rarely more so than at moments of grief and change. Birthdays, deaths, promotions – all seem destined to make us wonder what might have been.

It's Alice's 40th birthday, and her father is dying. Her most recent relationship is over, she still works at the school she attended, and she's never had children, or worked out if she wanted to. After drunkenly falling asleep at her childhood home, she wakes up on the morning of her 16th birthday – a day she now gets to live all over again. And, it turns out, again. And again – awakening in the present the morning after each time. Can she change her future? Does she want to? All she really wants is more time with her dad...

This is a novel of two parts – one part Emma Straub excels at; the other, less so. Alice's worries about her life and her future, the decisions she's made and the ones never made, are beautifully articulated and realised, as is her closeness to the father who brought her up, even as she realises his mistakes. The time travel aspects, alas, never quite land, or feel remotely real in the way that the people and relationships do – nor do the more peripheral characters whose lives Alice changes as she tweaks her own. Heartfelt, but frustrating. **Rhian Drinkwater**



THE FINAL STRIFE

★★★★☆

RELEASED 23 JUNE

614 pages | Hardback/ ebook/audiobook

Author **Saara El-Arifi**

Publisher **Harper Voyager**

Saara El-Arifi weaves Ghanaian and Middle Eastern culture and myths together in her impressive debut novel.

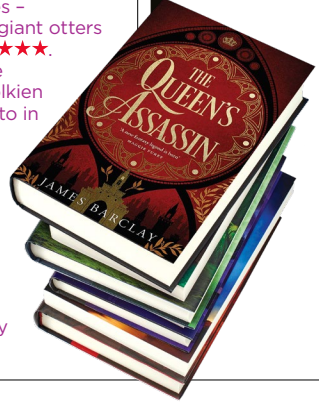
The Wardens' Empire is built on blood, with a society divided into three strata: red-blooded Embers at the top, blue-blooded Dusters below them, and clear-blooded Ghostings at the bottom. El-Arifi's protagonists are Sylah, an Ember child snatched by Dusters as a baby, and Anoor, the Duster infant left in Sylah's place to be raised by the cruel Warden Of Strength. Through a case of mistaken identity, Anoor recruits Sylah to train her for the upcoming trials to select the next generation of Wardens, a competition Sylah was supposed to enter before getting addicted to narcotics.

There's a great deal to enjoy here; El-Arifi's creative worldbuilding features traditional West African motifs like Griot storytellers and Kente fabric patterns, but Anoor and Sylah make for very contemporary heroines, comfortable in expressing their sexuality. They have engaging arcs, with Sylah stumbling towards redemption and Anoor discovering untapped reserves of strength, and there's a constant simmering frisson between the pair.

The hints about the Empire's secret history add depth and mystery to the adventure. But ultimately, it's the relationship that gives the story its beating heart. **David West**

ALSO OUT

As ever, there's lots more books we couldn't fit in. Everyone with a Y chromosome vanishes in Sandra Newman's **THE MEN** (out now, Granta). Then footage emerges of the missing being herded through otherworldly landscapes – could they be brought back? James Barclay's standalone fantasy **THE QUEEN'S ASSASSIN** (out now, Gollancz) centres on a battlefield surgeon with healing powers she must keep hidden (as such abilities are viewed as evil). That's going to get trickier once she becomes a member of the Queen's court... A bang on the head sends a Cuban-American kid back to 1985 to experience high school homophobia in David Valdes's *Back To The Future*-esque YA book **SPIN ME RIGHT ROUND** (out now, Bloomsbury). Enjoy your Dead Or Alive earworm... Anthony Ryan follows up his picaresque fantasy *The Pariah* with **THE MARTYR** (30 June, Orbit); former outlaw Alwyn Scribe is now a spymaster and protector of a royal who has visions of a demonic apocalypse. We enjoyed the first book, calling its prose "confident and moving". There's also a new adventure in a devastated future England for *Lockwood & Co* creator Jonathan Stroud's teenage outlaw Scarlett McCain and psychic-powered lad Albert Browne; a dangerous job goes pear-shaped in **THE NOTORIOUS SCARLETT AND BROWNE** (7 July, Walker). We loved the first in this YA series – especially the giant otters – giving it ★★★★★. Finally, the late Christopher Tolkien is paid tribute to in **THE GREAT TALES NEVER END** (24 July, Bodleian Library), a series of scholarly essays on the work of JRR's son and literary executor.



THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE


OLLY CURTIS

David Koepp

The *Jurassic Park* screenwriter loves his Screaming Goat

What is your daily writing routine like?
1) Start in the morning with the best intentions, 2) waste five or six hours on the internet until filled with self-loathing, then 3) work furiously for three hours. Repeat steps the next day, having learned nothing from yesterday's time-wasting.

Do you have any writing "bad habits" that you have to keep in check?
The internet is the scourge of all writers. How to avoid the web's lures and snares is a constant daily battle. I highly recommend an app called Freedom, which shuts down your access to the internet for a specified period of time. Within moments of firing it up, I find myself working on my story again. It's a godsend.

Have you got any personal mementos or knick-knacks on your desk?
A Slinky is essential, for distracted noodling. Also, a Screaming Goat toy, for moments of frustration. Google that and get one now!


OLIVER MORRIS/GETTY
Kurt Vonnegut, childhood hero.

Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing?
Music is essential, but it can't have any lyrics. Too distracting. Classical and movie scores fit the bill. Hans Zimmer's *Dunkirk* suits the mood of a lot of what I'm doing lately.

Have you ever come up with a good plot idea in a dream?
I *thought* they were good ideas, but the next day they turn out to be just weird dream detritus. Sadly, for me there seems to be no route to inspiration except through concentrated time at my desk.

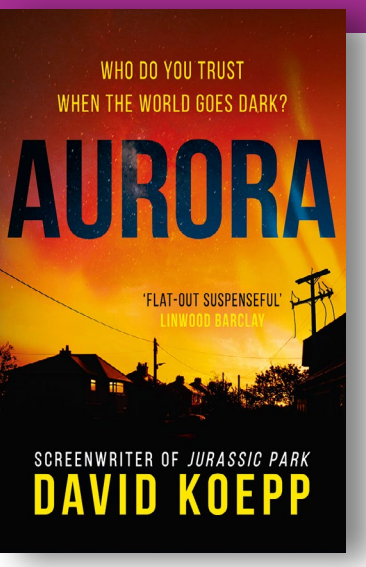
> **"Hans Zimmer's Dunkirk score suits the mood of a lot of what I'm doing lately"**

Were you a keen reader as a child? Which books were your favourites?
I was obsessed with all science fiction – HG Wells at first, and then Kurt Vonnegut as I moved into my disaffected teen years. I think that, between Vonnegut and Gary Trudeau (author of the *Doonesbury* comic strip), my entire world view was formed.

What would be your desert island book?
For sheer repeat readability and insight into the human condition, Trudeau's *Doonesbury Chronicles* collection cannot be beat. Yes, it's a comic strip, but no single novel can touch it for breadth, depth and scope of human feelings and behaviour.

What's the best feedback you've ever received?
The best feedback I got on *Cold Storage* came in a tweet. Stephen King had read the book and said how much he liked it, encouraging people to go buy it right away. To be praised by a writer whose work has meant so much to me all my life was an honour and delight.

What's the best piece of writing advice you've either received or read?
"Try to fall in love with the daily process of putting words on paper. If you can do that, everything else will fall into place." I printed that out and had it over my desk. Damn, it's true.



David Koepp's sci-fi thriller Aurora is on sale now, published by HQ.

BATMAN: KILLING TIME

The Big Steal

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!
Publisher **DC Comics/Black Label**
Writer **Tom King**
Artist **David Marquez**

ISSUES 1-3 **Comic writer Tom** King's projects have almost always been seriously psychological, especially when it comes to his lengthy run on *Batman* – so it's a surprise to see that his latest series featuring the Dark Knight goes in a very different direction. *Batman: Killing Time* isn't interested in spending time examining its characters. Instead, it concentrates on delivering a dark, fast-paced crime caper that pits the Caped Crusader against four of his best-known adversaries.

Set in the early days of Batman's career as a vigilante, this six-issue Black Label miniseries kicks off with an expertly timed heist that sees Catwoman, the Riddler, the Penguin and Killer Croc all working together in order to steal a mystery item from a bank vault.

The heist itself goes off without a hitch, but things start falling apart in the aftermath as the conspirators turn on each other. It also transpires that the mystery item is a potentially mythic object that belongs to Batman, and he is *extremely* keen to get it back...

The first three issues of this tightly crafted thrill-ride showcase a lot of jumping back and forward in time, but unlike in King's *Batman/Catwoman* miniseries, where his approach is occasionally inscrutable, the storytelling is always clear and concise, giving us a focused look at all the moving parts of the heist, and its rapidly escalating consequences.

There *are* some more out-there moments – especially when the story abruptly starts making occasional tangents into Greek mythology – but for the most part, this is a no-nonsense, pedal-to-the-metal tale of tension, intrigue and backstabbing.

The focus here is mainly on the villains – particularly Catwoman and the Riddler – and it helps that the setting means we get a pre-redemption Selina Kyle who's in full take-no-prisoners mode, and while the conflicts between the main group of adversaries are thoroughly entertaining, King also introduces an intimidatingly fearsome new villain, a mystery man known only as "the Help".

> **"For the most part this is a no-nonsense, pedal-to-the-metal tale of tension and intrigue"**

The plot twists are enjoyable, the set-pieces are eye-opening, and while the art from David Marquez is never revolutionary – his style is sturdy but very standard superhero action – he does pull off some moody atmosphere, along with an impressive muscle car remix of the Batmobile.

The final three issues will, of course, determine the ultimate resolution of this story (and the exact nature of what's been stolen), but so far *Killing Time* is a well-executed, nicely self-contained thriller that proves Tom King should just relax and enjoy himself with Batman stories more often. **Saxon Bullock**

i King's next project sees him team with artist Mitch Gerads for the Riddler-centric graphic novel *Batman: One Bad Day*.



You can stand under his umbrella, ella, ella, eh, eh.



SFX Loves

STEP BY BLOODY STEP

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!
Publisher **Image Comics**
Writer **Si Spurrier**
Artist **Mateus Bergara**

ISSUES 1-4 **Given that comics** are essentially an amalgamation of words and pictures, reading this beguiling series is initially a discombobulating experience, as you adjust to the complete absence of captions and dialogue – save for some indecipherable hieroglyphs, intriguingly rendered by letterer Jim Campbell.

It chronicles an amnesiac young girl and her mysterious armoured giant protector's journey through a vast fantastical world, in a completely straight line. You sometimes have to go back for a re-read to make sense of the unfolding plot, which spans a number of years over the course of the four issues, as the unnamed girl grows from a child to a teenager.

But that's no great hardship considering the lusciousness of Mateus Bergara's Moebius-esque art. Adding a few unexpected twists, Si Spurrier is unable to fall back on his usual witty quips and narrative tricks, so much more falls on Bergara's shoulders, and you have to pay special attention to facial expressions and study his expertly choreographed action sequences. Bergara's sumptuous work is further enhanced by Matheus Lopes's vibrant colouring.

While there are, as the title suggests, plenty of visceral, violent scenes, this infectiously charming series is worth many return visits. **Stephen Jewell**



THE PASSAGEWAY

★★★★½

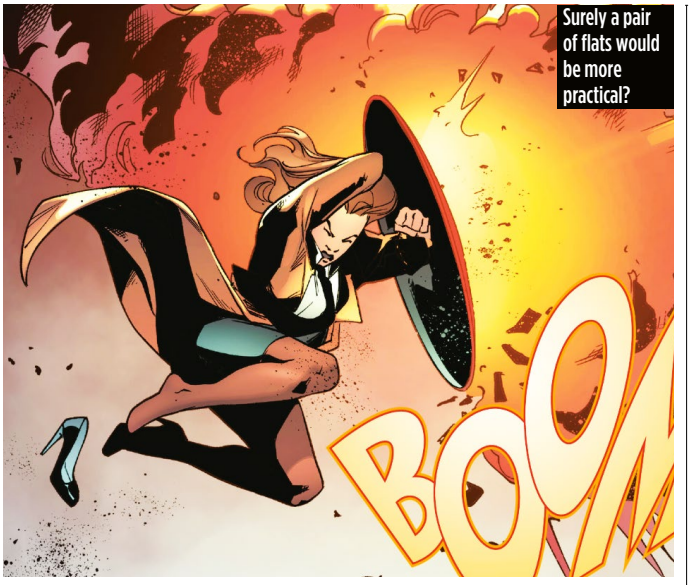
- RELEASED 21 JUNE
- Publisher **Image Comics**
- Writer **Jeff Lemire**
- Artist **Andrea Sorrentino**

GRAPHIC NOVEL **Jeff Lemire and** Andrea Sorrentino remain one of comics' most dynamic duos. This short graphic novel is the first part of the Bone Orchard Mythos – a new, loosely connected horror universe. Future releases will include miniseries and more standalone works. If they're anywhere near as memorable and strange as this then it will be a project worth keeping a close eye on.

John Reed of the Canadian Geological Society is summoned to a remote island with a single, lonely inhabitant. Sal has been tending the lighthouse for 25 years, but something has changed: a hole has appeared from nowhere, plunging down through the rocks. Reed sets out to find out what's at the bottom of this abyss – a foolhardy errand he will soon come to regret.

Like the creators' previous collaboration, *Gideon Falls*, *The Passageway* has one foot in the real world, the other somewhere far weirder and Lovecraftian. Robert Eggers's *The Lighthouse* is a clear influence, with the supernatural elements abstract and ambiguous. It's brilliant, unsettling stuff, expertly rendered by Sorrentino and colourist Dave Stewart, who daubs each page with thunderous greys and bright splashes of red.

A work so vivid you can practically feel the freezing Canadian waters and hear the cries of gulls wheeling ominously overhead. **Will Salmon**



CAPTAIN CARTER

Shield maiden

★★★½☆

- RELEASED OUT NOW!
- Publisher **Marvel Comics**
- Writer **Jamie McKelvie**
- Artist **Marika Cresta**

ISSUES 1-3 **The Multiverse is** a hot concept right now, and Captain Carter provides further proof of that. An alternate-universe version of Peggy Carter who took the super-soldier serum instead of Steve Rogers, her popularity has exploded following a slew of appearances in different media, and she's now netted her own five-issue Marvel miniseries.

It's an enjoyable remix of Captain America's arrival into the modern era, as Peggy is abruptly reawakened nearly 80 years after the Second World War. Returning to the UK and struggling to adapt, adventure is the last thing on Peggy's mind, but when evil organisation Hydra re-emerges, she doesn't hesitate to leap into action.

> **“Political shenanigans are a major factor”**

Political shenanigans and dark conspiracies are a major factor in these first three issues, and while Jamie McKelvie is better known as an artist than a writer, he does a good job of keeping this lively and fast-paced. The biggest strength is his portrayal of Peggy, with McElvie giving her some interesting nuances and making her both good-hearted and a little old-fashioned in her outlook.

It's hard not to wish that McKelvie was handling the interior art as well, rather than just the covers, but Marika Cresta pulls off some engaging and characterful visuals, channelling the energy of artists like Stuart Immonen in kinetic set-pieces. There are occasional stumbles – the political subtext briefly tips into preachiness, and the story hasn't yet managed any genuine surprises – but there's still enough potential here to suggest there'll be plenty more Captain Carter adventures to come. **Saxon Bullock**

i Captain Carter was first created as a playable character for the computer game *Marvel Puzzle Quest* in 2016.



ULTRASOUND

★★★★☆

- RELEASED 21 JUNE
- Publisher **Fantagraphics**
- Writer/artist **Conor Stechschulte**

COLLECTION **Philip K Dick fans** and anyone with an interest in the CIA's MK-Ultra project should be intrigued by this 380-page graphic novel, which deals with research into hypnotising people simply through sound frequencies.

Not that this becomes clear for quite some time. Initially, it's simply a quirky tale about a man whose car gets a puncture one night. Seeking help at a nearby house, Glen is encouraged by the depressive Arthur to sleep with his wife. Later, Arthur informs Glen that Cyndi's become pregnant. But nothing is quite as it seems...

It's a brain-taxing tale which makes the reader work for answers, but the mystery is absorbing and, like a Christopher Nolan film, should reward a return visit. Conor Stechschulte has a knack for realistic dialogue, with its awkward pauses and verbal slips, and employs some clever visual techniques: a very un-Hollywood sex scene is rendered even less glamorous by being presented on crumpled paper, while at one point Glen's recounting of the night is sketched on top, like a double-exposure photograph.

The art style evolves: starting off rather crude, concluding as slick. As the story (originally published in four instalments under the title *Generous Bosom*) was drawn between 2012 and 2021, this could be simply a matter of a developing technique, but feels fitting for a story where the truth slowly comes into focus. **Ian Berriman**

EVIL DEAD: THE GAME

Be the guy with the gun

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

- Reviewed on **PlayStation 5**
- Also on **PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Xbox Series X|S, PC, Switch**
- Publisher **Saber Interactive**

VIDEOGAME **Making a videogame** out of the predator/prey dynamic of '80s horror flicks has been done before, and often without much success. *Evil Dead: The Game*, however, manages to pull it off, thanks to being off-kilter in all the same ways as the classic movies.

That's largely thanks to the way it marries the horrors of the first *Evil Dead* with the gung-ho action of the following two movies. Survivors (including four different versions of Ash Williams) are able to grab powerful gear and level up while hunting down the tools necessary to dispel the Kandarian Demon. Get too scared by straying from the group, though, and you'll give away your location. The huge map means you'll have to hustle to get the map pieces that will guide you to the Kandarian dagger and missing Necronomicon pages you need (easier when you can talk through voice chat).

There's a real thrill to it all, and matches get very tense as they reach their climax, with the map shrinking down to tightly surrounding the Dark Ones and the Necronomicon. It mirrors that butt-clenching horror movie excitement as it all kicks off and you have no idea who, if anyone, is going to make it out the other end.

Meanwhile, the Kandarian Demon can be player-controlled, your spirit form taking on all the swoopy tilts of a Sam Raimi-handled camera. Unlocking more abilities as time passes and the survivors get spooked, you start off slowly, laying down all manner of jump scares like evil trees, and placing severed hands into supply caches that'll pilfer survivor items. With enough power, you can directly control Deadites, and even players themselves if they end up scared enough.

No matter which side of the mortal coil you're on, it feels great to play. Crunchy combat is empowering, and switching between chainsaw and boomstick on the fly is seamless. If that's not enough, single-player missions as well as crossplay and the ability to substitute in AI survivors and demons mean this game has plenty of life in it. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

i Spend 15 points, playing as the demon, to take possession of the laughing deer head in the cabin (as seen in *Evil Dead 2*).



Hey, it's Pablo from the *Ash vs Evil Dead* TV series!



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – SWANSONG

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

- Reviewed on **PlayStation 5**
- Also on **PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Xbox Series X|S, PC, Switch**
- Publisher **Nacon**

VIDEOGAME **Instead of donning** the fangs of a hard-done-by fledgling vamp, this take on White Wolf's pen-and-paper RPG casts you as three established bloodsuckers. But despite being older and wiser, these leads are no less at the mercy of the vampiric court, and soon compelled to investigate a surprise attack on Boston's immortal elite.

From there, the action is oddly restrained; rather than painting the town red, gameplay sees you lost in conversation and tabletop RPG-style skill checks. Drawing from the well of tableside tension, a failed skill check can drastically alter the course of the story, and your choices have a welcome amount of far-reaching consequence.

In a similar vein, you'll need to keep a notebook handy, as *Swansong* takes an old-school approach to playing detective. There's plenty to sink your teeth into, as you're granted the space to connect the dots yourself – and forced to live with the repercussions of missing the bigger picture. But even if you don't crack the case, there's a satisfying narrative feast to be found in the protagonists' overlapping arcs. There's no escaping its distinctly limited production values, but its ambition is impossible to resist. **Jess Kinghorn**

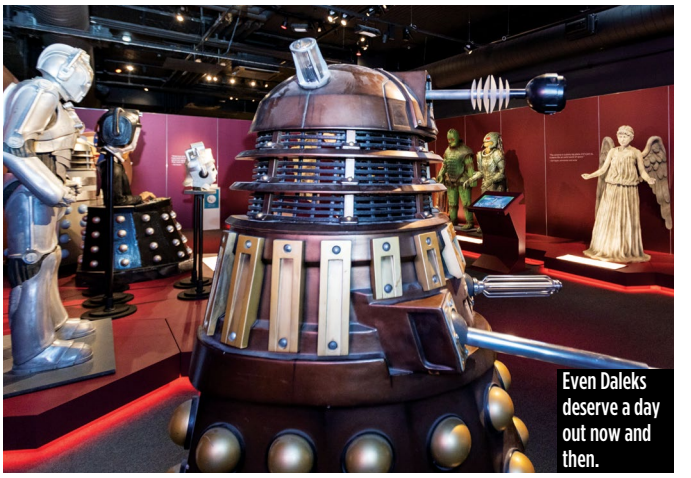
DOCTOR WHO: WORLDS OF WONDER

Going Down To Liverpool

★★★★☆

OPENING DATES Running until 30 OCTOBER

Venue **World Museum, Liverpool**



Even Daleks deserve a day out now and then.

EXHIBITION **It's five years since** the long-running *Doctor Who Experience* in Cardiff closed. As *SFX* visited the new *Worlds Of Wonder* exhibition on its opening day, it was heartening to see kids who'd have been too young to visit that pointing excitedly at props and costumes they recognised from the telly. Every fan should get the chance to do this.

Most of the exhibits, unsurprisingly, hail from the post-2005 phase of the programme, with a 2022-vintage Sea Devil bringing us right up to date, but there are some very fine examples dating from the 20th century – the K1 from Tom Baker's debut "Robot" looks particularly resplendent. The presentation is pleasingly dynamic, with some very effective posing. Best of all is the Cassandra prop, which lacks a face, this having been added on-screen via CG; a projector adds an animated face and newly recorded dialogue from Zoe Wanamaker, so Cassandra speaks as you walk past her.

The premise of the exhibition is to make connections between *Doctor Who* and science. As in the show itself, the educational content plays second fiddle to the monsters, but it's all engagingly presented, and the material from Professor Clifford Johnson on time travel and black holes is especially good.

In fact, it's a shame the exhibition doesn't link this more explicitly to *Doctor Who*; Johnson talks about how black holes could be tapped to create huge sources of energy, but the video doesn't mention that the Time Lords did exactly this to achieve mastery of time travel. The exhibition takes about 90 minutes to go round – two hours if you watch every video and have a good old go on the Dalek voice modulator. Plan a day trip to Liverpool this summer, if you can. You might even learn something. **Eddie Robson**

i The TARDIS console from *An Adventure In Space And Time* has a lever marked BERNARD WILKIE, after the effects man.

THE HORUS HERESY: AGE OF DARKNESS

SFX Loves

The Marines Are Coming

★★★★★

RELEASED 18 JUNE

Number of players **Two**

Publisher **Games Workshop**



To quote Mr Bean, "Look at all those guns."

TABLETOP GAME **The Horus Heresy** has been around as a tabletop system since 2012, but even if you regularly haunt your local Games Workshop you may not have been aware of it. The backstory – a civil war between the Space Marines 10 millennia before *Warhammer 40,000* – is popular in the fiction, but the game was mostly restricted to mail order and those willing to spend big on specialist models and upgrade kits. This relaunch finally brings it to the mainstream, and moves many of the previously resin-only miniatures to more wallet-friendly plastic.

Let's start there. The *Age Of Darkness* set isn't cheap, but it is great value. You get 40 Space Marines, 10 Terminators, two characters, a dreadnought and a massive Spartan tank. The miniatures are superb – a nostalgic return to the original Mk 6 Space Marine design of the '80s, given a modern look – and while this is billed as a two-player box, we bet most will be using the contents as the core of a single army.

Rules-wise, this is effectively a throwback to *40K*'s seventh edition, with the traditional three-phase turn structure (move, shoot, assault), no psychic phase and nuanced rules for vehicles (hooray for the return of Armour Values). But the biggest change is the Reactions mechanic. This allows the player to do things in their opponent's turn. Some reactions are universal, others Legion-specific. It's a smart way of making the game more dynamic while adding extra jeopardy. If you're firing on a heavily-armed squad, for instance, you'd better be ready for them to immediately shoot back.

It's a really impressive set, one that strikes a balance between welcoming in new players without alienating the fans that have kept the *Heresy* alive. If you miss the days when Marines had beaks, then this is for you. **Will Salmon**

i The army lists and background for Space Marine legions are available in two books: *Liber Astartes* and *Liber Hereticus*.

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

SCI-FI PRIDE

Time to wave your flag this month, as we test your knowledge of all things LGBTQ+ in the worlds of sci-fi, fantasy and horror

Quizmaster **Darren Scott, Editor**

QUESTION 1
Which planet does *Rocky Horror* mad scientist Dr Frank-N-Furter come from?

QUESTION 2
Name the *Torchwood* character who died in his boyfriend's arms after breathing poisonous gas.

QUESTION 3
In 2021, which superhero came out as bisexual, causing complaints from those unaware more than one version of the character existed?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Identify the homoerotic horror movie from this detail of the poster.


QUESTION 4

QUESTION 5
In the ITV sitcom *Vicious*, what is Ian McKellen's character's sci-fi claim to fame?

QUESTION 6
Which role did Ian McKellen play in *Doctor Who*?

QUESTION 7
In *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which queen dressed as Eldrad from classic *Doctor Who* story "The Hand Of Fear"?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Identify this Australian comedy series.


QUESTION 8

QUESTION 9
Which supernatural entity from a 2014 horror film was appropriated by the LGBTQ+ community as an unlikely icon?

QUESTION 10
In the DC comics, who did Harley Quinn find love with after her split from the Joker?


QUESTION 12

QUESTION 11
In which fictional magazine did Ruby Rose's Batwoman come out?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Name this *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode that attempted to cover same-sex relationships.

QUESTION 13
The first Marvel same-sex wedding of which characters in *Astonishing X-Men* caused a media storm?

QUESTION 14
How did Willow avenge the death of her girlfriend Tara?

QUESTION 15
Which bisexual actress plays Batwoman/Ryan Wilder?


QUESTION 16

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Which *Doctor Who* episode featured this gay couple?

QUESTION 17
Who was the first trans superhero in Marvel Comics?

QUESTION 18
Which two LGBTQ+ characters were killed in season nine of *The Walking Dead*?

QUESTION 19
Name the sci-fi TV series from the Wachowskis which featured multiple gay and trans characters.

QUESTION 20
Which member of the Umbrella Academy is non-binary/ pansexual?

Answers

1 Transsexual 2 Ianto Jones 3 Superman 4 *A Nightmare On Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* 5 He was voted 10th best villain in *Doctor Who* 6 The Great Intelligence in "The Snowmen" 7 Lawrence Chaney 8 *Outland* 9 The Babadook 10 Poison Ivy 11 CatCo 12 "The Outcast" 13 Jean-Paul Beaubier (Northstar) and Kyle Jinadu 14 She flayed her killer alive 15 Javicia Leslie 16 "Gridlock" 17 Sera, one of the Anchorites 18 Jesus and Tara 19 *Sense8* 20 Klaus Hargreeves

How did you do?

The judges and I will deliberate...

0-5
Sashay away

6-10
My dear, you are up for elimination

11-15
You are safe

16-19
Lipsync for your life!

20
Condragulations, you're a winner, baby

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

SFX 355 ON SALE 13 JULY

DC LEAGUE OF SUPER PETS
Pets and heroes – our worlds collide

SHE-HULK
You won't like her when she's angry

NOPE
Jordan Peele's new horror is here

GAME OF THRONES
The House Of The Dragon is ready to serve

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PREY

Sign up to our monthly newsletter to receive a sneak preview! bit.ly/SFXnewsletter

GETTY

ALL CONTENTS ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE, PROBABLY LIKELY TO LIGHT REFRACTION RENDERING THEM INVISIBLE

Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy



Seconds later, she coughed up a massive furball.

Batman Returns

Darren Scott, Editor



Batman is the earliest memory I have of being a genre fan. How or why, I've no idea – it must've been repeats of the TV series that had me telling my mum and nana about the "naughty Joker". They fully supported my love of such things, and I never looked back. By the time 1989's Tim Burton movie came around, I was fully caught up in Batmania. But it was 1992's sequel that was to forever capture my heart. Even now it's my favourite film of all time.

Growing up "other", the duality of all the characters really triggered something within me. I knew what it felt like to be shunned or unwanted by certain parts of society – not that I had flippers, but sometimes it might have felt like it. I appreciated that they all lashed out in their own, ahem, individual way; that lines were blurred. And hey, we've all had *that* day at work, haven't we?

Danny Elfman's soaring score as Selina Kyle trashes her apartment and transforms into Catwoman is heartbreaking yet chilling. Burton's dark, dark vision of Gotham – and Bo Welch's incredible design – also spoke to me. Hell, it didn't just speak, it practically screamed at me to move there. And there's just something about snow that makes everything that little bit more magical – and also somehow sinister.

The film also has a wonderful campness that the later two instalments could only dream of naturally achieving – it doesn't need nipples, codpieces and dud jokes, it hits the mark every time without tipping over the edge, despite Christopher Walken delicately nibbling on the scenery in a pitch-perfect performance.

It breaks my cold-blooded Penguin heart that the Pfeiffer-starring Catwoman solo film never happened. Burton, DiNovi and writer Daniel Walters were all on-board and a script submitted, but it never came to fruition, largely because the franchise was going to be taken in a somewhat lighter direction. A version of it eventually became the albatross around Halle Berry's neck – which I also adore...

And since the discussion comes around every year, I'll save you the bother: it *is* a Christmas film, it *is* the best Batman movie and a kiss *can* be even deadlier if you mean it.

Darren doesn't know about you, but he feels so much yummier.

Fact Attack!

→ **McDonald's was reportedly unhappy at how dark the film was – discovering that its Happy Meal promotion was inappropriate.**

→ **Annette Bening had originally been cast to play Catwoman, but left the production when she became pregnant.**

→ **Dustin Hoffman declined to play the Penguin – a role which took DeVito up to four hours getting into make-up to prepare for.**

→ **David Bowie turned down the role of Max Shreck in favour of appearing (briefly) in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*.**

→ **DC's recent *Batman '89* comic continues the story from *Batman Returns*, including Robin but ignoring the two films that followed.**

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CHRISTOPHER **ECCLESTON**



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DOCTOR WHO

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THE QUARRY





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